

ALEXEI MUSATOV

STOZHARI VILLAGE



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
MOSCOW

SOVIET LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

ALEXEI MUSATOV

STOZHARI VILLAGE

STALIN PRIZE

1 9 4 9

ALEXEI MUSATOV

STOZHARI VILLAGE

A story



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN

BY R. DIXON

ILLUSTRATED BY O. KOROVIN



CHAPTER 1

A LETTER

His desk being by the window, Sanka Konshakov had an earlier opportunity than anyone else to watch the spring stealing up to the village, the thaw tingeing the hillocks with russet, the snow darkening in the fields and the river swelling in the ravine. And when the ice broke, Sanka was the first to announce the news to the whole class.

From the class-room window he also had a good view of the road along which Timka Kolehkin, the collective-farm postman, used to pass twice a week, towards the end of the second lesson.

Then Sanka would raise his hand and, having got permission to leave the room, would dash headlong in pursuit of Timka.

But that day the postman was late. The bell had gone, midday recess had begun, and there was still no sign of him.

Dressed as he was, without putting on his wadded jacket, but just clapping on his moppy head the forage-cap he had been wearing all winter—as you could see by his ears, which were still peeling from frost-bite—Sanka ran out round the corner of the school.

The snow lay dark and porous, little streamlets were nibbling their way with a dull gurgling over the black road, the thaw patches on the sun-warmed hillocks seemed dry and warm: it made you feel like taking off your boots and running over them barefooted!

"The ice must have broken somewhere on the river. Timka will be held up now, or else he'll get the letters wet," Sanka mused worriedly.

Craning his neck, he screwed up his eyes for a long time at the sun and then looked from side to side, sniffing as though he could not believe that the sun, the warming wind and the damp, fragrant air were all real and were spring.

Around a curve in the road, young Timka Kolechkin came into sight, small and fair-headed in a sheepskin coat the worse for wear and a sheepskin cap.

Sanka strode up and shook hands with him in a business-like way.

"You're late, postman!"

"They've taken away the bridge by Kalachovka," said Timka. "They're expecting the ice to start drifting. I only just managed to get across the river."

Sanka nodded at the bulging mail-bag over Timka's shoulder, "Big mail today?"

"I've not got it all yet. Not even half of it. Do you know how many letters go through the post? Thousands! They don't have time to sort 'em. There's a whole slack waiting."

"And nothing for us again?"

"I'm trying to explain to you," Timka avoided looking Sanka in the face, "they've not given me all the mail. They're late with the sorting. When I get the rest tomorrow, there's sure to be some for you."

"That's what you said last time—sure to be. And the time before too!" Sanka made a despondent gesture and set off back to school.

Timka sighed as though he had wronged Sanka somehow, rummaged in his bag, and hurried after him.

"Call Masha Rakitina. There's a letter for her!"

Sanka stopped, cast a glance at the envelope and waved to a slip of a girl with large eyes and short flaxen hair who was standing with her playmates in the school porch.

Tucking her hands in her jacket sleeves, as she had been doing all winter, Masha Rakitina came up to Timka.

A letter for her! And by post too! What an event!

True, a year before, after a quarrel with her schoolmate Zina Kolesova, who lived three doors away from her, a letter had come for Masha marked "urgent," with three stamps on the envelope. But then it was not the postman with his bulging bag who had brought it, but Zina's little brother. He had thrown it in through the window and shouted: "Zina will have nothing to do with you till her dying day. Don't you call for her and don't sit next to her at school either!"

Masha had not even thought of reading the letter. She had swept it out with the rubbish, and after making things up two days later, the girls had looked for it on the rubbish heap, torn it up in tiny pieces without reading it, and thrown it to the winds.

This time, however, it was a real letter come by post that Timka Kolehkin was holding in his hand, a fat one in a white envelope, all covered with heavy black postmarks.

Masha took it incredulously and made a sudden dash for the classroom. Her schoolmates ran after her.

"Who's it from, Masha?"

"Read it quickly!"

"Look at the address, the handwriting!"

But the girl, seating herself at her desk, thrust out her sharp elbows and clasped the letter to her breast.

"Go away. . . . I won't show you anything. I'll read it myself first. Go away, all of you!"

The children reluctantly dispersed to their places. But do what they would, their heads, like sunflowers turning towards the sun, kept turning towards Masha, and their eyes enviously watched her reading her letter.

All of a sudden she leapt up, shouting with an excited toss of her head:

"Girls, boys, all you from our villages who were Andrei Ivanich's pupils! You know . . . he's alive! Alive!" The girl waved the letter like a signalling flag. "He's sent us a letter. He wants to know how we're all getting on!"

The children crowded round her desk again.

"Really?"

"Where is he now?"

"Why didn't he write for so long?"

"Read it! Don't keep us on edge!"

"No, no; anybody but Masha," objected plump-faced, fishy-eyed Petka Devyatkin, remembering the girl's habit of jumbling the words in her haste. "Let Konshakov read it."

With a trembling hand Sanka took the letter from Masha.

A deep silence came over the room.

Their teacher, Andrei Ivanich Rakitin, Masha's uncle, was writing through his niece to all his former pupils. He told them that he was laid up in hospital with wounds, but was feeling quite well, and had a lot he wanted to tell them about. He had not written for so long because he had been in places where there were neither field post-offices nor postmen.

He would tell them all about those far-off places later, when he came home to his native Stozhari. And that would not be so long now.

"And what will you, dear friends, have to show your fathers and brothers when they have fought the war out and come home?" Sanka read out the teacher's words. "How are you? How are you getting on at school? Are your mothers satisfied with your work? How is our garden by the river, where we loved so much to work before the war? Is it still there? Does the corn with which Pushkin Collective Farm made a name for itself still ripen in the fields? Tell me all about everything, about our collective farm, our school. Do not be surprised, my friends, to find a few seeds in this letter."

"What seeds? Where are they?" shouted Syomushkin.

Masha took out of the envelope a small paper package on which was written, "Censors requested not to delay—Seed," tore it open and emptied out on to the palm of her hand some tiny brown seeds.

The children's heads bent over her hand.

"Poppy seeds, aren't they?" asked Zina Kolesova.

"They don't look like them," Masha answered.

"I found these seeds," Sanka went on reading, "in a field near our trench. The field was all overgrown with weeds with just a few heads of clover in seed peeping out of them. The clover was so big that I was lost in admiration. Rich fodder they must have grown in that field. I picked out the best seeds, kept them, and am now sending them to you. Foster this good seed, cultivate it, and it will repay you generously for your labours.

"What can we do with the seeds if there are so few of them?' you will ask. But remember our collective-farm brigade leader Yegor Platonovich Konshakov. Before the war he raised a wonderful variety of wheat out of no more than three ears. Yes, three ears, containing exactly two hundred and eight grains.

"Ask Katerina Vasilievna Konshakova and our experimenter Zakhar Mitrich Vekshin all about it. Take great care of that rare variety Yegor Platonovich cultivated, my friends. Do not let it be wasted. For our soldiers every little ear of wheat, every blade of grass is precious nowadays. When they come home they will rejoice with you over our golden cornfields and thank you from the bottom of their hearts for your exertions and your care.

Your teacher,

Andrei Ivanich."

The schoolchildren again pored over the seeds in Masha's hand. Many times had they seen cereal and fodder seeds in the field and on the threshing floor, in the boxes of the seeding machine and in the drum of the threshing machine, in sacks or bins in the barns; but never had these dark little seeds, as compact as compressed springs, aroused so much interest as these did now.

CHAPTER 2

SPRING

Masha was on her way home from school with Sanka. It was about two miles to Stozhari, the village where they lived.

Naughty little streams, as though plotting against the children, every now and then barred their way. Now they would spread out into large pools, now they would flow across the road, gushing angrily and muttering: "No, we won't let you pass!"

Masha was the first to get tired of looking for crossings and stepping stones; she waded resolutely through pools and streams, and Sanka was hardly able to keep up with her.

Stozhari hove in sight. The village stretched in two long rows on the high bank of the winding river Stozharka. There were newly built houses as well as old peasant cottages. In the back yards squatted temporary light-shy outhouses and even dug-outs. Here and there along the wide street you could see white resinous frameworks of houses, stacks of bulky beams, piles of stakes; a saw-horse, its stocky legs astride, was standing ready for sawing planks.

The land between the houses was bare and open. The hedges and fences were not continuous as before the war and only the broad-crowned birches and tall poplars clung obstinately to their old places.

The streets were deserted. Sanka and Masha turned off into the back lane. How much more interesting it was to go home that way than through the village. There among the outbuildings, people were bustling about and calling to each other, carts rumbled by, cows in the farm-yard were loudly and plaintively lowing their longing for fresh grass, while in the smithy the iron rang with the peculiar clarity it has only in early spring.

Whether because it was a real spring day, warm and sunny with a caressing wind, or because she was the bearer of such a precious letter, Masha felt like sharing her joy with everyone she met.

"Good afternoon!" she greeted the collective-farm women. "We've got a letter . . . from Andrei Ivanich."

With kindly smiles the women stopped and questioned her.

Both the children had places on the farm which they preferred to others.

First Masha looked in at the poultry-yard, then she made Sanka go with her to the calf stalls—she just had to pay a visit to Dolinka, the little calf she and her mother had nursed through the winter.

White-headed, damp-nosed Dolinka recognized its nurse, ran up to her, caught hold of her finger and started sucking it noisily.

Not far from the calf stalls was the pig farm. In a sty surrounded by a close wattle fence, the sucking pigs, as pink as if they had just come out of a bath, were feeding in the sunshine.

"Just for a minute, Sanka," Masha said, tugging at the boy's sleeve when she saw how bored he looked.

She quickly climbed over the fence and crouched down calling: "Piggy, piggy, piggy!"

But the piggies took no notice of her. They raced in a close pack from one corner to another or, crowding round their tender, poked her feet with their snouts and squealed piercingly. Their large floppy ears glistened in the sunshine.

"Auntie Lukeria," Masha inquired, "when are we going to christen them? The other girls and I have thought of so many names: Daisy, Forget-me-not, Cornflower."

"Fine flowers they are!" said the pig-tender with a gesture of disgust at the creatures. "The rascals, the gluttons! They're deafening me with their squealing!"

At last Masha caught one of them and started scratching its back. The little animal stretched itself out at her feet, grunting with delight.

"Ah, you stupid little piggy! You darling!" Masha whispered fondly.

"There's a darling for you," mocked the tender.

Masha raised her head. A small pig had seized her school-bag and was dragging it along the ground.

The girl rushed after it, snatched up her school-bag, climbed in discomfort back over the fence and looked around—Sanka was not there.

He was already standing outside the blacksmith's. He gripped the handles of a newly repaired plough, manipulated the levers of a seed-er, tried with his foot the bayonet-sharp teeth of a harrow. Then he peeped in at the door of the low sooty forge where the bearded smith

Yevseich was plying his magic trade by the steadily roaring furnace. Presently, with a deft movement the smith drew out of the furnace a fiery orange-coloured snake, threw it on the anvil and menacingly wielded his hammer.

"Take that, and that!" the hammer rang out, but the snake seemed to get angry, and showered the smith with prickling sparks. Then it curled into an arc, turned a dull red, and finally, being thrust into a tub of water, hissed, sent up a cloud of steam and turned into a horse-shoe.

"Ah! Young Konshakov!" Yevseich said, noticing Sanka. "Getting the run of things, eh? That's the style. Well . . . take a hammer."

That was all Sanka had been waiting for. Throwing off his jacket and rolling up his shirt-sleeves, he seized a small hammer expectantly.

When Masha looked in at the forge, she saw Yevseich and Sanka forging iron together. With everybody else busy, a girl like Masha could not remain idle. She ran to the bellows:

"I'll fan the furnace."

"Aha! I'm getting assistants, am I?" Yevseich threw another horse-shoe into the water and wiped his face with his sleeve.

With a glance at Masha, Sanka, too, gravely wiped his face, spat in his hands and changed his grip on the hammer.

"Any more work?"

"Oh, just a bit," Yevseich said with a grin.

"A dozen ploughs and a score of harrows."

Then he took the hammer from Sanka.

"Run along home, son. You've been two hours getting there as it is."

Carelessly throwing his jacket over his shoulders, Sanka left the forge, flushed and satisfied.

"Put your coat on, blacksmith," said Masha, pulling at his sleeve. "It isn't hot outside. . . ."

Sanka gave no answer. He looked at the fields, listened to the water gurgling in the ravine behind the smithy, and smiled.

"What a spring, Masha! Why, it's just as if . . . as if it was racing in on a *troika* . . ." And unexpectedly he asked: "What are you going to do this summer?"

"Summer's a long way off," Masha answered in surprise.

"I know it is. Still, you've got to think ahead," he remarked. "Heard about the kids from Loktevo? They worked in the fields all last summer. Did all the ploughing and sowing themselves. And you should see the wheat they grew."

"Well, what about it, Sanka?" Masha interrupted him impatiently.

"You see . . . Styopa Karasyov and I are thinking of joining a brigade."

"Joining a brigade?" Masha stopped.

"Yes. My mother's. Haven't you heard what my mother is starting? . . . You remember my father, don't you?"

"Uncle Yegor? I should think so!" Masha's interest was roused. "It used to be grand looking for mushrooms with him—you could fill a whole basket every time. And what lovely whistles he used to make!"

"That's not what I mean. I'm talking about something else," Sanka interrupted her. "Do you remember how he started turning up the virgin soil t'other side of the ravine, on Staraya Pustosh?"

"Yes, I do," Masha replied.

"But he never managed to sow—the war stopped him. Well, my mother's got an idea into her head we ought to grow wheat on Staraya Pustosh this year. . ."

"Just a minute, Sanka," Masha interrupted him. "Your mother's already got a plot . . . in the nearest field."

"That's one thing. Her brigade will keep that too. But Staraya Pustosh will be extra."

"But will she manage it all?"

"Tatyana Rodionovna is giving her help from the Young Communist League—Lena Odintsova and her chums. Only mother's not got enough people all the same."

"Well, they won't take you," Masha sighed.

"Why not?" Sanka was offended. "Why can't I work? You'll see—I'll ask mother and she'll take me on. She needs everyone she can get now." He looked sideways at the girl. "If you like, I can get your name down too."

"Can you, Sanka?" Masha was overjoyed. "You know, I can weed and reap too."

"Take my word for it," Sanka assured her. "I'll get your name down."

"And do you know what, Sanka, suppose we sowed Staraya Pustosh with the wheat your father grew. Have you seen it? Where is it kept? Does your mother know?"

"Most likely she does," Sanka replied, though not so sure himself. "Let's go to your house, Sanka; we'll ask your mother."

The Konshakovs' cottage stood at the end of the village that the Stozhari people called the Big End. Its windows looked out over the river. It had been built the summer before, on the site of their large cottage that had been burnt down by the nazis. Small, with only two windows, and built out of charred beams, the cottage did not look particularly attractive. A good part of it was still unfinished; only half the roof over the lean-to cattle shed was completed, moss and tow were to be seen sticking out of the walls, the steps up to the porch barely held together. "It's not draughty, the roof doesn't leak, it's all right to live in. We'll bother about beauty later," Katerina Konshakova, Sanka's mother, used to say.

Sanka and Masha went in. Sanka's younger sister, Fenya, with hair plaited into wiry pigtails, was just like Sanka, flaxen-headed and covered with golden star-shaped freckles, but smaller than he. She was sweeping the floor.

In a corner, Nikitka, a chubby eight-year-old youngster was playing with the kitten, "teaching" it to run about blindfolded.

"Isn't Auntie Katerina in?" Masha inquired.

"It doesn't matter. We'll look for it without her," Sanka said.

He searched the passage and the store-room, peeping into every old barrel, box and pail. He was itching to turn the house upside down.

Under a bed he noticed a painted plywood box in which his step-mother, after seeing his father off to the front, had packed away his suit and shirts, some tools, and a canvas satchel crammed full of books and papers. "When he comes back safe and sound, he'll find everything there," she had said.

Sanka dragged out the box and started to rummage through its contents. Out tumbled cobblers' and joiners' tools and some papers.

"Sanka," Masha said stopping him, "perhaps we ought to wait. Your mother will be cross."

"Here's Mummy!" Fenya shouted suddenly, looking out of the window.

CHAPTER 3

THREE EARS OF CORN

After two years' widowhood following the death of his first wife, Sanka's father, Yegor Konshakov, courted the young widow Katerina and one day brought her home with her son Nikitka.

Lightly pushing Katerina towards the awe-stricken Sanka and Fenya, he said with a merry twinkle in his eye:

"Here you are, Konshaks, here's a new mummy for you. Be loving and kind to one another. Live in peace and deference."

Sanka had known Katerina for a long time. She was the collective-farm accountant. She only came up to his father's shoulder, was dark-eyed and full of life—nothing like his deceased mother, who had been tall and languid.

"What a mummy!" thought Sanka deprecatively. "She ought to be playing *lapta** with us."

With Katerina's arrival, the state of neglect that had reigned in the Konshakovs' house after the death of the mother disappeared. Everything was washed and scrubbed. Mats and embroidered table-cloths made their appearance, flowers decorated the windows, and the gramophone Katerina had brought with her was often heard playing. With her own hands she fitted the children out anew, and took care that they did not go about untidy.

Fenya was quick in making friends with Nikitka and getting used to her new mother, from whom she started to learn the sewing-machine. Sanka alone could not accustom himself to the idea that this dark, mischievous-eyed slip of a woman was to take the place of his mother. Katerina liked to sing with the girls, plait their hair, and

* Russian ball game.—Tr.

tell them fairy-tales; time and again she joined with the children in a game of catch and run.

"A merry place is the Konshakovs'," the neighbours would say with a smile. With them Katerina was on good terms just as soon as with the children.

Katerina and Yegor lived as one heart and soul.

That life did not last long, however. The war broke out, and Yegor went to the front with the other men.

Nearer and nearer the nazis came to Stozhari. The women, old men and youngsters were obliged to leave their collective farm and go far behind the line.

A year and a half later, Stozhari was liberated and the collective farmers returned.

"Here we are at home!" Katerina said, although where the Konshakovs' big cottage had been, loomed only charred walls. Then, noticing with what terrified eyes the children stared, and how they would not move a step from her, she shouted sternly: "What are you holding on to my skirt for? Out you go into the street. Run about and play. We are going to live as we used to. We shall wait till Daddy comes, and we'll build a house. The war won't keep him away from us for ever."

When the new cottage was put up, Katerina looked for the photos of Yegor she had managed to save and tacked them on the wall in the place of honour.

Everything was an occasion for Katerina to remember Yegor. She would not allow the kiddies to cry over such trifles as a scraped knee or a cut finger, for Daddy was suffering a hundred times more "out there." The elder ones must not dare be wicked to little Nikitka, for Father would know about everything when he came home, and severely punish the culprit.

Of an evening Katerina would gather the children in a circle.

"What is Daddy doing now?" she would ask. And then in a singing tone, as though telling a fairy-tale, she would start relating the adventures of the brave soldier, Yegor Konshakov.

Those adventures were always extraordinary. Every time he came face to face with the foe Yegor would display astounding strength and valour.

The children could have listened to their mother for ever, though Sanka did notice that some things in her narrative were not quite right.

Their father was a cavalryman, a senior sergeant, but from the mother's accounts it appeared that he commanded thousands of men; and not only did he wield the sabre, he also shot the enemy with a machine-gun and a cannon, crushed them under the tracks of a tank, and bombed them from a plane.

"What is Dad, then?" Sanka would inquire with a condescending chuckle. "A major? A colonel? Perhaps he's even a general?"

"Keep your remarks to yourself, clever sticks, and don't prevent the others from listening," Katerina would retort. "A fine son you are, if you think your father can't become a general."

On the present occasion the children had no time to put things right before Katerina crossed the threshold, gasping with vexation at the disorder in the cottage.

"Konshaks, you brigands!" was all she could find to say.

"Auntie Katya," Masha rose apologizing, "don't be very angry. We're only looking for the corn."

"What corn?"

"What Yegor Platonovich grew out of three ears. Andrei Ivanich told us about it in his letter."

"The school-teacher? A letter?" Katerina looked at Masha incredulously. "Why he's been missing for nearly a year!"

"But he's turned up now! He's in hospital. Only he doesn't say where he was wounded."

Masha showed Katerina the letter and the clover seeds.

Katerina went over to the window with the letter, thinking that the spring was not starting so badly if a fine chap like Andrei Ivanich had sent news. It took a weight off her heart. "He did not write for two years. . . . And now he's turned up. That means Yegor will write too."

Katerina looked at Sanka and Masha, who were still rummaging in the box.

"It's no use looking for the corn. It's not here. An agronomist from the selection station came here before you. All he wanted was ten grains for seed. But where could I get them?"



"Then where is it? Tell us, Auntie Katya," Masha begged.

"What is there to tell? It would only upset you." Katerina waved the question aside. But seeing the pleading in Masha's and Sanka's eyes she sat down on the bench.

"Well, if you must know, I'll tell you. It may teach you something.

"Your father and I once went looking for mushrooms on Staraya Pustosh. Well, we went along, hallooing now and again, but the mushrooms seemed to be hiding from us. Suddenly Yegor Platonovich called me. I went up to him and there he was sitting in the middle of a clearing, happy as a sand-boy. 'Look, Katerina, what an ear of corn I've found!' 'Well I never!' I said. 'An ear of corn! I thought you'd come across a whole regiment of mushrooms!'

"But he got down on his knees and started crawling in the grass. 'Look for more, Katerina! Look for more! Why, it's rare wheat, a very old sort! The old folk speak wonders of it. Wind and rain won't lay it. It doesn't shed its grain, and it fears neither frost nor drought.'

"We found another two ears. And true enough they were large and heavy. I hadn't seen anything like it in my life.

"And Yegor Platonovich gathered a harvest from those three ears, asked Andrei Ivanich's advice, and in the spring they sowed the grains on a bed in the vegetable garden. The bed was no larger than the table, but what a fine harvest they got!

"Then just before the war your father sowed a small field with the new sort. But it did not have time to ripen. The war started, the nazis came to Stozhari, and we had to leave our collective farm. I ran to Yegor's plot to set fire to the corn, but it was green and wouldn't burn. What could I do? I pulled it out by the roots and trampled on it..."

"So you spoilt it all?" Sanka asked, getting up.

"Yes," Katerina said, turning away to the window.

"What are we going to tell Andrei Ivanich now?" asked Masha.

"Why hide the truth? Tell him just what happened," Katerina said with a sigh, and started tidying the house.

Then she glanced at Sanka who was looking through a copy-book.

"What's that you've got your nose in?"

"This ... I found it among Dad's things. It's called 'Thoughts and Dreams'." Sanka handed his mother a thick copy-book bound in black cloth.

Katerina turned over the pages. It was Yegor's treasured note-book in which he once used to jot down all sorts of plans, observations and calculations: all his thoughts and dreams, as he had been fond of calling them.

In it were plans for irrigating the vegetable gardens, draining the Dalneye swamp and building a power station on the river.

"Look, he's got it all worked out for Staraya Pustosh as well. Everything's written down as neat as in a manual—what kind of earth it is and what fertilizers it needs. That's a very timely find of yours, Sanka. And I've been trying to think where your Dad's notes could have got to. I shall certainly read them to our collective-farm women."

Sanka cast a glance at Masha and then sidled up to his mother.

"Won't you put us down in your brigade? We want to work with you too."

"Who's we?"

"Well, me and Styopa ... and Masha..."

"And what about school?"

That brought Sanka up short. "What has school got to do with it? We're not babies. We'll manage ploughing and weeding. You've taken on Lena Odintsova and her pals. We can work just as well as they."

"Oh, you can, can you?..." Katerina said with a frown. "You'll be able to work all right when the time comes. There's land enough to last your lifetime. But just now, school's the place for you."

Masha slipped quietly out of the cottage. Sanka followed her.

"You see, I told you, they won't put our names down. You started all wrong," Masha reproached him.

"I like to say what I think."

"You should have put it in a different way. It's no good just saying you want to help the grown-ups. In our spare time, you ought to say, after school.... You know what, Sanka, we'll go and see Tatyana Rodionovna tomorrow. She'll understand."

"All right, let's."

"But mind you, I'm going to speak first. Or else you'll rush in and spoil the whole thing again."

"So you'll do the talking and I'll stand there like a dummy," Sanka exclaimed looking offended.

"Well, you can nod and put in a word when necessary."

"All right. We'll see when we get there," Sanka agreed.

They parted. Masha ran off home, Sanka went back into the cottage.

Sitting by the table was Yevdokia Devyatkina, a stout, bloated-looking woman from next door. Being a distant relation of Yegor Platonovich's, she considered herself in duty bound to keep an eye on the Konshakov family, and was fond of lecturing Katerina and the children.

"I've heard about this idea of yours. You are flying high," she was saying. "But I have my fears, Katya dearie. You're a fresh hand at corn growing and they've only given you young fledglings to help you. It will be a pity if it turns out a failure. If you would only take it easy and go on book-keeping like when Yegor Platonovich was here, it would be quieter for you and more in your line."

"Fancy you talking like that!" Katerina flared up. "You know what our real corn-growers are doing, don't you? They're rooting the thistles out of our native land. We're the ones who've got to feed them now."

"Well, I was only saying...." Yevdokia was confused. And for a long time she sat talking about her ailments and complaints.

"VEKSHIN'S OUTFIT"

Next day, after school, Masha and Sanka set out for the collective-farm office.

The office was on a busy corner, where the lane from the fields joined the main road. Like most of the houses in Stozhari, it was still in the building.

Resinous chips of wood, curled yellow shavings and heaps of damp brown sawdust were lying all around. The workmen had removed the shaggy thatching from the roof and were replacing it with light white shingle.

Masha and Sanka went in. The building, big as a barn, was as yet innocent of any partitions and smelt of resin and pine-needles. The walls and ceilings glittered, and the newly-laid floor-boards creaked.

The office was full of noise and bustle.

Tatyana Rodionovna, the collective-farm chairwoman, a thick-set, broad-faced woman, had thrown her kerchief back off her head and with the brigade leaders was poring over a plan of the farm lands spread out on the table.

"Look, Masha," whispered Sanka, "that Rodionovna's quite old. She's got grey hair too."

"She's not old, she's the same age as Mummy—getting on for forty-seven. Only Rodionovna grew old early. Do you think it's an easy life being a chairwoman? Mummy says Rodionovna's the ever-watching eye."

"The what?"

"It means she doesn't sleep much, the day's not long enough for her. She spends it all in the fields or the farm-yard and at night she sits in the office working out schedules and plans. It's enough to make anyone go grey."

Soon the brigade leaders left and Tatyana Rodionovna noticed Sanka and Masha.

"Do you want to see me, children?"

Masha stepped forward. "Yes, Tatyana Rodionovna. We've got some business to talk to you about."

"Yes, business," Sanka seconded her.

"Well then, out with it!" Tatyana Rodionovna smiled faintly. "But perhaps I already know what you want to speak about. You want to be enrolled in Katerina's brigade. Isn't that the case?"

"That's right," Sanka agreed, exchanging glances with Masha. "But how do you know?"

His throat suddenly went dry and the speech, which in spite of Masha's prohibition, he had nevertheless prepared, instantly fled from his memory. He expected Tatyana Rodionovna to burst out laughing and send them home to learn their lessons. But she did nothing of the sort. She just shook her head and became thoughtful.

"So you two came together. Looking after yourselves, eh? Didn't bother about the others. And you're Pioneers, if I'm not mistaken?"

Masha nodded. "Yes, Tatyana Rodionovna."

"Where's your team spirit then? I've been getting no peace from you children on this score. Is it spring or something that makes you like that? Yesterday Styopa Karasyov and Alyosha Syomushkin came --wanted to be put on ploughing--just like that. The day before, another two turned up--want to work in the fields too. Now you and Sanka. Why not all get together?"

"Oh, we will," Masha was all eagerness. "But you'll be sure and put us in the brigade then, won't you?"

Before Tatyana Rodionovna could reply, a short sturdy girl with a broad weather-beaten face came running into the office. It was Lena Odintsova. She hastily explained to Tatyana Rodionovna that Grandad Vekshin absolutely refused to let any of the girls join Katerina Konshakova; he was making a tremendous fuss and would presently arrive in person.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, a tall lean old man came in, angrily tapping with a juniper stick.

Tatyana Rodionovna rose to welcome him.

Before the war, Zakhar Mitrich Vershin, known generally as "Grandad Vekshin," had enjoyed a reputation in Stozhari for being

an experienced vegetable and fruit grower. The Stozhari onions and cucumbers he had raised were famous throughout the region.

When the nazis came, they did a lot of damage to the experimental plot attached to the collective-farm laboratory, destroying the hot-beds and spoiling the fruit-trees.

After his return to Stozhari from a partisan detachment, Zakhar Mitrich eagerly set to work. He would go out to the meadow with the mowers and to the fields with the ploughmen; but acute attacks of his old rheumatism more and more frequently kept him in bed or forced him to mope about in his own yard in the scorched old felt boots that he had to wear for warmth.

Seeing he was chafing in idleness, Tatyana Rodionovna had offered him a job as watchman at the collective-farm office. The old man turned it down and volunteered to work on the derelict experimental plot.

"I've not got many years to live, Rodionovna, but what I have got I want to spend as close to the earth as possible. All I ask you is not to refuse me help."

The chairwoman understood the old man and gave him as assistants the Young Communist Leaguers Lena Odintsova and her friends. The very first year, Zakhar Mitrich set to work trying out new sorts of corn, fodder grass, and vegetables, and raising fruit-tree and bush seedlings.

Some people in the collective farm considered Zakhar Mitrich's experiments a premature, useless venture—there was a war on and a dearth of hands for field work anyhow—but Tatyana Rodionovna did everything to defend "Vekshin's outfit," as the experimental plot was called at Stozhari, and helped him as much as was in her power.

The girls proved to be painstaking, obliging assistants and the old man grew quite fond of them.

"So you want to make me shut up shop, do you?" Vekshin said resentfully. "I taught and fostered those girls, and now, to thank me, you are luring them away."

"Zakhar Mitrich..." Tatyana Rodionovna tried to put in a word.

"Enough of your 'Zakhar Mitrich'! Our soldiers will be coming home and asking: 'Where's our collective farm's old reputation?' 'Where's our famous Stozhari corn, our splendid seeds?' What answer

shall we give them? No, Rodionovna, that's not the way I want it! I want our fields to swish and swash like a mighty sea. I want everything to bloom and blossom all around as though no evil eye had ever blighted our Stozhari."

"And don't you think that's what I want too?" Tatyana Rodionovna at last managed to have her say. "You were with the partisans, Zakhar Mitrich; you ought to understand. How is a war fought? Aren't all forces massed where the big battle is to be tomorrow? Well our fields, our corn—that's the biggest of the big for us now. And didn't you yourself advise Katerina to plough up Staraya Pustosh?"

"That's true," the old man agreed. "It was me that put her on to it."

"You see then. . . . And who should be put in the front line if not the Young Communist Leaguers?"

"So mine's a rear line, is it?"

"Your work too, Zakhar Mitrich, means a lot to us. We won't leave you without help."

"Don't try to console me, chairwoman, I know your reserves. A couple of old fellows like me and deaf old Manefa."

"Just a minute, Zakhar Mitrich," Tatyana Rodionovna suddenly remembered something. "We have an excellent pair of assistants for you. Just dying to work." She turned to Sanka and Masha: "What about you, children—do you agree to work under Grandad Vekshin?"

Taken aback, Masha and Sanka had no time to answer before Vekshin turned heavily on his seat and riveted his eyes on them.

"Take kids? Might as well let goats loose in the garden! Why they . . . last summer they pinched my seed cucumbers. And the day before yesterday they threw a stone at my hotbeds and broke one of the glass panes."

Sanka knew nothing about the cucumbers or the broken pane, but he could not withstand the old man's persistent gaze; he flushed crimson and shrank back.

"Grandad," Masha interrupted, "Sanka had nothing to do with it."

Zakhar Mitrich rose with a gloomy gesture.

"Don't you hitch them on to me, Rodionovna. I'd rather you sent old Manefa and some of the old retired men to give me a hand."

"It's all right, Zakhar Mitrich. You'll get to like one another in time," Tatyana Rodionovna said soothingly. "Just keep them well in hand. It'll do them nothing but good. And they will be reliable assistants for you."

Sanka and Masha left the office. The last islets of snow on the roofs were melting away, and the repeated dripping had chiselled in the snow along the cottages deep dark furrows so straight that they might have been traced with a ruler. The hens were already scratching in the earth heaped up round the houses, and the moulting cocks were clearing their throats and flapping their wings aggressively. The sky over Stozhari seemed to have widened, becoming an endless vault of blue.

"Well, a lot of use that was!" Sanka declared shortly.

"Perhaps it's all for the best," Masha tried to conciliate him. "They won't put us in the brigade anyhow. Let's get together as many Pioneers as we can, and off to Grandad Vekshin. We'll dig and sow all on our own. We'll carry out all sorts of experiments. Won't we, Sanka? Vekshin's outfit is important too, you know."

"Huh! Important! Growing onions, and mousy carrots and all that stuff. Very interesting!"

He was annoyed. They had not managed to have a serious talk with Tatyana Rodionovna after all. And Masha was to blame. She should have stuck to her guns; but at the first mention of "Vekshin's outfit" she had let herself be coaxed into it and forgotten all the rest.

"Vekshin won't let you kids near the beds anyhow. He dithers over every measly plant."

Masha stopped. "What do you mean 'you kids'? Aren't you going to work with us?"

"No, count me out. I'll look for something else," Sanka retorted with a sneer. And taking a run he jumped over a broad seething pool and strode off home.

CHAPTER 5

SPEED AND DARING

In the morning, on his way to school, Sanka noticed that the water under the bridge had risen, and that the wind blowing from over the blue ridge of firs on the horizon was warm and strong.

"That's the kind of wind that breaks the ice," he thought. "Just wait, it'll soon start drifting."

It is fine to have your desk just by the window. But two days before Sanka had had bad luck.

Nadezhda Petrovna, the mathematics teacher, noticing that Sanka was looking out of the window more than at the blackboard, had transferred him to the "Chukotka Peninsula," as the class called the rough desk in the far corner of the room.

But to miss the breaking of the ice was just not to be contemplated. Sanka entered into negotiations with Petka Devyatkin, who, for a half-used pencil, agreed temporarily to give up his place at the window.

The last lesson started.

All of a sudden there was a noise outside like the cracking of glass. It was distant and faint, but Sanka's alert ear caught it perfectly. He leaned close to the window. The river was still motionless and quiet; but as he watched, winding cracks spread over the lawny shell of ice, rifts appeared, and the water, foaming and seething, gushed out; the whole river trembled and stirred, and deliberately, as though testing its strength before a long and wearying journey, started moving.

Then the whole class heard a shout of joy:

"It's off! It's moving!"

"What's the matter, Konshakov?" The mathematics teacher looked up. "Why have you gone back to the place at the window?"

"The ice has started drifting, Nadezhda Petrovna!" Masha explained with an envious look at Sanka. "He's always the first to notice it. But that's only because he's got such a lucky place, right by the window."

Nadezhda Petrovna put on her spectacles, went to the window and looked at the river.

"Quite so," she said. "But what do you expect at this time of year? It is a law of nature." And returning to her table she told Sanka in her usual dull voice to take his place again at the back desk.

Sanka sighed and changed places with Petka. He could not help thinking of Andrei Ivanich.

Andrei Ivanich had been strict, but when the ice-drift started he would always pick away the putty round the window himself, open it wide and stand for a long time with the children looking at the river.

"The game is up, Jack Frost!" he would say. "Now you won't stop our quiet old Stozharka. On she will go to the sea!" And he would take a deep breath of spring air.

The wind from the river would burst into the class-room, blowing over the pages of the books, bellying out the wall map like a sail, and to the children it would seem that the blue rivers and lakes on the map had come to life just like the river Stozharka outside.

Even the ears of the old stuffed hare, who had been hibernating in the cupboard all the winter would stir in the breeze and its fur would bristle as though the old fellow were ready to leap out of the room into the street and bound off without looking back, to the first sunny patch of grass he could find.

The last lesson that day seemed as though it would never end. It even occurred to Sanka that the school watchwoman must have got absorbed in the ice-drift and forgotten to keep an eye on the clock.

At last the bell went.

"The ice is drifting on the river," it seemed to say to Sanka: "the water is gushing and rushing, overflowing its banks, and you are still sitting in the class-room doing sums. Do you make a habit of missing events like the drifting of the ice, or the flooding of the fields, or rain with hail, or the first snowfall, or trees felled by a storm in the wood, or a fire in the village?"

Slipping his books into the gas-mask container he used as a school-bag, Sanka ran out on to the school steps and stopped, listening attentively. A dull steady roar was coming from the unfettered river.

The river Stozharka flowed through the middle of the big village of Torbeyevo, on the edge of which the school stood, then meandered across the meadows and fields, cut through a sparse coppice and, enclosed between steep banks, flowed down to Stozhari.

Soon all the Stozhari school children had gathered on the steps. An argument began as to how they should go home—over the plank foot-bridge they had been using all winter on their way to school, or over the bridge on the by-pass road.

Alyosha Syomushkin, frisky as a squirrel, judiciously remarked that the foot-bridge had probably already been carried away by the ice and they would have to go by the bridge on the by-pass.

Petka Devyatkin agreed with Syomushkin in his heart of hearts, but looked at Sanka just in case. Who knew what ideas Sanka might get into his head?

Though Devyatkin considered himself Sanka's best friend and lost no opportunity of talking about "Konshak and me," it was seldom Sanka took any heed of his opinion.

When his father joined the army, Petka had felt himself quite grown-up. He had taken it into his head that it was below his dignity to go barefoot, and in rain or sunshine always wore his father's heavy hunting boots, despite the pain they often caused him. He got himself a tasselled silk tobacco pouch and started smoking noxious home-grown tobacco. He purchased a cherry-coloured plastic comb and a pocket mirror and, wetting his hair, exerted himself every morning to get a natty parting in it.

Over his lessons he gave himself no trouble, had been kept down for a second year in class six and did not feel great offence at being called "Petka Never-Go-Up."

His mother's attitude to all this was a lenient one. In talks with her neighbours she would say that her dear Petka had all the brains in the world anyhow and would be able to stand up for himself in life.

Petka was mischievous and quarrelsome, but did not show much courage or skill in a fight; often enough he would come home with a punched nose or a black eye.

Petka's mother frequently advised her son to make a chum of Sanka Konshakov and was always trying to impress on them both

that they were relatives and should always stand up for each other. She sometimes asked Sanka to her house and treated him, sympathetically inquiring after his father, or recalling his dead mother.

Wherever Sanka went, Petka always followed him, and Sanka often had to help his mischievous neighbour out of a scrape.

Presently Sanka gave a long whistle.

Whoever heard of watching the ice from the bridge? The best place, of course, was the big bend in the river, where there was always a traffic-jam and the floes piled up on one another.

"We'll get across," Sanka said, and turned off along the path they used in winter. On he strode, not even looking back, confident that his pa's would not lag behind.

With a devil-may-care sweep of the hand Devyatkin seconded him: "Come along! Chaps like us can get across anywhere!"

The children followed Sanka.

Syomushkin hesitated and then dragged on behind the others along the winter track.

Masha nudged chubby, slow-moving Zina Kolesova: "Let's go and have a look too."

Soon they had all gathered by the river. It was no longer the same river they had seen from the class-room window.

As though sensing that the way was clear, the ice advanced like a mighty living avalanche. Jagged sheets of ice were creeping one on another, tilting over and standing on edge. The dark water was seething between them.

The children looked at each other—there was no sign of the wooden foot-bridge.

"Chaps like us can get across anywhere!" Syomushkin let fly ironically at Sanka. "One chap like you went across, and three days later they were still dragging the river-bed for him. Well, who's coming with me to the bridge?"

The girls and some of the boys followed him.

"Let's go by the bridge too, Konshak," said Devyatkin.

Sanka kept his frowning greenish eyes fixed on the floes racing down the river. He, Sanka Konshakov, not get across? Suppose he had been a partisan. He might easily have been, if his mother had

not taken him away with her when the nazis got near the village. A young partisan, a scout or a despatch carrier. And just suppose it was spring, and there was an ice-drift like this one, and the detachment commander ordered him to cross the river on a very important mission. He could not go over the bridge, there would be German sentries on it. And the ice was drifting. How could he manage? Sanka straightened his forage cap on his head, pulled up the tops of his boots and walked along the bank, his eyes searching for something.

Then he noticed Masha. She was standing just at the edge of the water, her gaze riveted on the floating ice; her kerchief had slipped down to the back of her neck, baring a pair of little pink ears; the wind was ruffling her bobbed hair.

"Masha, we are waiting," Zina Kolesova called to her from the hillock. "Let's go over the bridge."

But Masha did not hear a word.

"Look how fast the floes are drifting," she said, beckoning to Sanka.

Devyatkin came running up to her: "The others are calling you. Can't you hear?"

Masha merely glanced at him and turned back to Sanka: "Can they float down to the sea?"

"I expect so. . . . Yes, Masha, you should go to the bridge with Syomushkin," Sanka advised her.

"No . . . I'll watch. You are going to cross on the ice, aren't you?"

"Where did you get that idea?" Sanka feigned surprise.

"You will. I know you will. I guessed as much in school when you looked at the river. But doesn't it scare you terribly, Sanka?"

Sanka grinned but did not answer. Truth to tell, he was rather flattered that she had not gone with Syomushkin but had remained on the bank.

Devyatkin, however, was frowning at Sanka. He was put out. Masha had to be in on everything. Sometimes he and Sanka would get the boys together and go to secret places in the forest looking for mushrooms, or to the dried-up marsh for bilberries, and no sooner had they passed the outskirts of the village than Masha would come running after them: "I like that! Going for mushrooms without tell-

ing me. I'll remember that." And she would ramble with them the whole day long in the woods, never hanging behind.

Looking for mushrooms or berries, Devyatkin managed to put up with Masha. But when he set out for the fields to feast on other people's peas, or for the woods to light a bonfire, Masha was nothing short of a nuisance to him.

"We'll have to give that girl a scare," he decided. "there's no getting rid of her." So one day, when Masha joined the boys in Sanka's absence, Petka suggested a game of "Keep your hands covered!"

"Yes, yes!" the children shouted gleefully. They all wrapped their hands in green burdock leaves and plucked tall nettles. Then, to the chorus "Keep your hands covered" they started running after one another and lashing out at bare arms and legs. Masha liked the game at first: you could run, scream and dodge. But her blouse sleeves were short, her skirt only came down to her knees and she got more than her share of nettles. Her arms and legs were covered with a red rash, tears appeared in her eyes. "If only they would stop this game soon!" she thought. But nothing could stop the boys; they leapt around Masha, roaring with laughter and brandishing their nettles.

Then Masha got furious. She tore up a whole bunch of nettles and, forgetting all the rules of the game, lashed out right and left, as with a broom, at the boys, at their arms, their legs, their heads. Devyatkin got more than anyone else. The boys fell back, and after that they were afraid to drive the girl away.

At last Sanka found an old branch near the road, broke the twigs off it, and glancing sideways to see whether Masha was there, went down to the water.

Soon a broad firm sheet of ice, shaped like a map of Australia, struck the bank. Sanka sprang on to it and pushed off with his pole.

The stream caught the ice, whirled it round on the spot and then carried it forward, dashing it violently against the blocked floes. The sheet of ice broke in two, but in one bound Sanka sprang on to a second sheet, then a third, then a fourth. . . .

Masha could not take her eyes off him. That Konshak, there was a lad for you. Always thinking of things that took your breath away. The Stozhari boys, especially those from the Big End, were quite right

to think Sanka the biggest dare-devil of all and always make him their leader.

With a last jump, Sanka sprang on to the opposite bank, whipped off his cap, tossed it in the air and shouted something which was drowned by the roar of the ice-floes.

Then he pointed downstream as much as to say: "There you are, I'll meet you all at the bridge."

The boys looked at one another. Would it do them credit to lag behind their leader? Arming themselves with poles, they went to the water's edge.

The first to jump on to the ice was large-headed thick-set Styopa Karasyov, nicknamed, on account of his broad shoulders and short stature, Styopa "So-by-So."

"Speed and daring, that's the main thing!" Devyatkin shouted after him.

After Styopa, ginger-headed Vanya Strokin crossed.

Devyatkin's turn came. He had the pluck to jump on to the ice, but then he stumbled, got his boot full of water and came back to the bank.

"Gosh, you might get drowned doing that! Rotten business!"

"Konshak and me," Masha mimicked scornfully. "And you're supposed to be his lifelong friend!"

"Lifelong friend? If my pal throws himself into the fire, must I go in after him? No thanks."

Masha unexpectedly snatched the pole out of Petka's hands and jumped on to the ice.

"You're crazy!" Petka shouted. "You'll get drowned!"

Masha waved a contemptuous hand at him.

Everything went well at first. The girl leapt lightly from one floe to another and soon she was far from the bank. Then the unexpected happened: the ice-floes parted like heavy gates, a wide gap was formed in the middle of the river, and the small block on which Masha stood drifted with the rushing stream towards the bridge, where the ice was being dashed to pieces against the wooden pierage and where everything was foaming and seething as in a cauldron.

Sanka shouted to the girl to punt harder with her pole. Masha tried for all she was worth. Suddenly she slipped and dropped her pole into the water. The river, as though realizing that the girl had lost her last defence, carried the ice-floe still more quickly towards the bridge.

Sanka and his companions did not know what to do. He rushed along the bank waving his hands and then dashed away from the river towards a shed near which a heavy black boat was lying overturned.

Styopa So-by-So and Vanya Strokin came running to help him: together the three of them turned the boat over and started dragging it towards the water.

"Look, boys, it's got a leak!" Styopa shouted wildly, pointing to a hole in the bottom.

Sanka left the boat and ran to the river. On the wind from the opposite bank came Devyatkin's heart-rending cries:

"She's drowning! Help! Save her!"

CHAPTER 6

THE BOY IN THE FUR CAP

There is no telling how it would have all ended, had it not been for a young lad in a short jacket of grey uniform cloth, heavy army top boots, several sizes too large for him, and a soldier's cap with ear-flaps. He came running down from the hillock and shook Devyatkin rather roughly by the shoulders with a sharp, "What's all the fuss about?"

"One of our girls . . . On the ice . . . Rotten business . . . Drifting towards the bridge. . ." Petka stuttered. "Oh, the stupid girl. . .!"

"I can see," the boy in the fur cap interrupted him gloweringly and, unbuttoning his jacket, he pulled off his belt as though resolved to thrash Petka on the spot; then he swung his haversack off his shoulders and ripped the strapping off it . . . "Got a belt?"

"A belt?" Petka inquired vacantly.

"Well, the belt from your trousers. Or a cord. Come on! Give me anything you've got!"

Then he thrust his hand under Petka's jacket, felt the belt on his stomach, took it off, just as unceremoniously tore the strings from Petka's school-bag, and tied the belts, straps and strings together.

Then he jumped on to a rocking ice-block and started making his way towards Masha.

He stopped on the edge of the gap in the ice and, swinging his arm, threw the improvised life-line with all his might towards the girl.

Masha did not understand at once what she was to do. The line swished over her head and splashed in the water. The lad quickly drew it in, coiled it into a ring and, shouting angrily: "Catch it," slung the line into the air again.

By that time Masha had recovered her wits. She caught the end of the line and dug her feet into the ice block, and the boy in the fur cap started carefully hauling her together with the ice-floe towards himself. The gap grew narrower and narrower and in the end closed completely. The lad took Masha's hand and led her to the bank, picking out the biggest floes so that they would carry them both. Sometimes the stream drove the floes apart again. "It's all right," the boy kept saying, waiting for the gap to close. "It's all right!"

Thus they made for the shore.

Feeling solid ground under her feet, Masha turned away from the river and hid her face in her hands. Then she looked at her unexpected rescuer. He was standing a little way off, engrossed in untying the knots in the straps.

"Boy, I say, boy!" Masha called to him timidly. The boy in the fur cap looked round.

With a guilty smile, not knowing how to express her gratitude, Masha suddenly ran up to the boy and took the wet straps out of his hands.

"Here, let me undo them!" And digging her teeth into the straps she started to untie the tight-drawn knots.

The other children came running up from the bridge: Sanka and his pals, Alyosha Syomushkin and Zina Kolesova.

Anxious and out of breath, they surrounded Masha.



"What ... what did you try to cross the ice for?" Sanka blurted out.

"I could have made it," Masha's eyelids fluttered with embarrassment, "but the water all round ... it made me dizzy."

"We always have bad luck with you," Devyatkin strutted up to her like a young cockerel and beat his chest with his fist. "You might have got drowned. And they'd have said it was our fault. Just like last year when you got cramp in the leg, swimming."

"You should talk," Masha retorted. "You were the one who got cramp."

"Listen to that." Devyatkin flew into a temper. Turning to the others: "She's even got the nerve to argue. That's the limit. Tell her to keep away from us. And never come back again. Let her go with the other girls."

"That's a cheerful way of talking," the boy in the fur cap murmured. "Is that your way here?"

Sanka swung round as though someone had given him a push. The boy was sitting on a russet-coloured thawed patch, drying his feet. He was slim and swarthy, and quite short, and had a slight squint in his mischievously sparkling eyes.

"What do you mean—our way?" Sanka demanded warily.

The boy did not answer at once. He wrung out a wet foot-cloth, deftly wound it round his foot without a single crease and pushed his foot into one of his large boots.

"Just this . . . the girl was nearly drowning, and quite a lot of you were standing watching her from the bank."

"From the bank . . . who?"

"Sorry, from the bridge."

"You just mind what you say."

Without realizing quite what he was doing, Sanka took a step towards the stranger and suddenly, in an unnecessarily severe tone inquired, "Who are you anyway? Where are you going?"

The boy in the fur cap jumped up and stamped his feet to make them comfortable.

"A patrol, eh! Want to check my papers! Perhaps you want to know my name and address?"

"Check your papers? . . . Maybe I will. There are all sorts going about. . . ."

But the boy appeared not to have heard the last words. He was looking at Masha.

The girl, standing on one leg, had taken the boot off the other and, hopping to keep her balance, was emptying the water out of it. Her foot was red and raw with cold.

The boy ran up to Petka, snatched his satchel out of his hands, took out a pair of dry foot-cloths and held them out to the girl. "Put these fresh ones on, you'll get a cold."

Sanka nearly choked with annoyance. Not content with almost calling him a coward, here was this chap who had suddenly appeared from nowhere being the first to offer Masha a change of foot-cloths.

But Masha did not take them.

"I'll run home. . . ." Then, turning back to the boy in the fur cap: "Come to our house. You can warm yourself there. Have you still far to go?"

"I'm going to Stozhari, to Pushkin Collective Farm."

"To Stozhari?" the girl exclaimed. "That's our village! We are all from there. There's our village across the river. But who are you going to see?"

"Grandad Vekshin. Is there a man by that name in your place? Zakhar Mitrich."

"You're going to see him?"

"Yes."

Masha took a step back, then walked round the boy.

"Is your name Fedya? Fedya Cherkashin?"

The boy nodded, looking puzzled.

"Listen to that, lads!" Masha cried. "Vekshin's grandson has come to see him! Fedya Cherkashin!" And taking the boy in the fur cap by the hand she dragged him after her. "Come along! I'll take you there!"

CHAPTER 7

THE "FAIRY COTTAGE"

Grandad Vekshin's house was on the outskirts of the village. Surviving the nazi occupation by a miracle, the big cottage had subsided into the ground, and now leaned forward as if ready to run out to the main road and say to all who came to Stozhari: "Welcome! Drop in! There's plenty of room."

Nor did people need any persuasion to call in at Grandad's.

Carters and drivers after delivering a load at the station, often put up there over night. They would cook their supper, drink tea, and, spreading fresh straw on the floor, settle down to sleep. In the morning, around "state cottage," as the villagers called Grandad Vekshin's place, you could hear the roar of engines, the neighing of horses, the clang of buckets.

The old man charged nobody anything for accommodation. He was hurt to the quick when anyone pressed a crumpled note into his hand, and would shout angrily at the carters or lorry-drivers: "What are you carrying? Corn, potatoes? They're for the front, aren't they? Supplies for the troops. Well deliver 'em quickly, there's no time to waste over tea and refreshments."

But he would not refuse to have supper with his guests and, besides, he sometimes found a tin of preserves, a length of polony or a loaf of bread left by them in the table drawer on their departure.

The school children called Grandad Vekshin's house the "fairy cottage" and used to gather there of an evening to do their homework, listen to the old man's tales or just sit "by the light," which nowhere burned so bright and inviting as in the fairy cottage; for the drivers supplied Grandad generously with lamp oil.

Masha was first to run up to the cottage. She felt under the step for the key and opened the door.

"Come on in!" she called merrily to Fedya. "It doesn't matter that Grandad is out. He won't mind."

Zina Kolesova, Alyosha Syomushkin and a few others followed Masha and Fedya into the cottage.

Sanka and his pals lingered hesitatingly near the porch.

"It was grand the way he rescued Masha," said Styopa So-by-So in a subdued voice. "Where did he blow up from, this Fedya? Let's go in, Konshak, and have a chat."

Sanka said nothing. There was no denying it, the chap was resourceful and cool-headed. And he, Sanka, had started fussing with a leaky boat. After what had happened on the river how could he go in, and what would he say to Masha?

He shrugged his shoulders. "Go in, if you're interested. I've got to go home." And off he went through the village.

His friends exchanged glances and trailed after him.

On entering the cottage, Masha quickly took off her boots, hung up her coat and climbed on to the ledge over the stove.

Fedya looked round at the brown log walls hung with dried sweet-smelling herbs, sheaves of wheat, rye and oats.

"Will Grandad soon be here?" he asked.

"He'll come all right. You get up here," Masha called to him from the stove. "It's warm here."

Fedya did not refuse. The others climbed on to the stove too.

"Not all at once!" Masha scolded. "You'll knock the stove down. It's an old one."

Stealing glances at Fedya, the girl remembered how Grandad Vekshin had once called her in to tell her of a great joy of his—Fedya Cherkashin, the orphan boy he had befriended while in the partisan detachment, had been found. The boy had come to be like his own

grandson but they had lost trace of each other fighting the German fascists. But then Fedya had written telling him that he was under treatment in a military hospital in the distant city of Tashkent and would afterwards go to live in a sanatorium. Zakhar wanted to answer immediately that he was living a lonely life, his wife having died, and would the boy come as quickly as possible to his grandfather. Masha had written the letter. Then she had told Zina Kolesova about Vekshin's partisan grandson and the girls had knitted two pairs of mittens as a present for him. Time had elapsed and still Fedya Cherkashin had not arrived.

Then Masha and her chum had started writing oftener.

They had tried all means of persuading him that there was no need for him to go and live in some sanatorium, and that he should come as quickly as he could to Stozhari: the air there was pure, the water in the river was clear and cool, there were plenty of mushrooms and berries in the woods, and creamy milk on the farm, and Fedya would feel so well there that he would get just as strong as Styopa So-by-So, Sanka Konshakov and Petka Devyatkin.

"Just come from the sanatorium?" Masha asked unexpectedly.

"How do you know?" inquired Fedya surprised.

"I know a lot about you. You're Grandad Vekshin's grandson, aren't you? We've been waiting ages for you."

"So those letters were from you? Are you Masha?"

"Yes, I am," Masha laughed. "And here is Zina Kolesova. She knitted the mittens for you. And here is Syomushkin. He's the terror of all the *susliks* here. And here is—" Masha introduced each one by name, saying what he was remarkable for, and the children leaned over to Fedya and shook hands with him.

The floor-boards in the passage creaked.

"There's Grandad," Masha guessed, and, winking to her chums, she whispered to Fedya. "Don't you show yourself straight away," she said. "Keep still."

The boys squeezed Fedya into the corner. Grandad Vekshin opened the door and asked gruffly:

"Well, fairy cottage, who lives here?"

"The nibbling mouse," squeaked Masha.

"The croaking frog," echoed Zina.

"The buzzing gnat," said Syomushkin in a shrill voice.

Grandad Vekshin looked askance at the children's wet boots and shoes on the doorstep and shook his head.

"Well, my web-footed goslings! So you've wet your feet and come to Grandad Vekshin's stove, have you? You'd catch it at home for that. Just you wait, I'll show you up."

"But, Grandad, we didn't come to warm ourselves," said Mashia. "we've brought you some news."

"I know your news."

"Really though, Grandad!"

Suddenly, from the stove, the very farthest corner of the ledge, flowed such loud, melodious nightingale's warbling that all the children pricked up their ears in astonishment and Grandad Vekshin even backed to the door.

"What magic are you up to? Who's playing tricks there? Get down! Get down, I tell you!"

"It's me Grandad . . . me."

Fedya jumped lightly down and again let forth a merry warble, just like a real nightingale.

"Remember, Grandad? Doesn't it tell you something?"

The old man's face lit up as though flooded with sunlight.

"Indeed it does, my little nightingale!" And the old man, forgetting his seventy summers, answered the nightingale's trills with the hoot of an owl.

The boy responded with the boom of a bittern. The old man gave the tender, high-pitched cry of the oriole, and the boy answered with the call of the cuckoo.

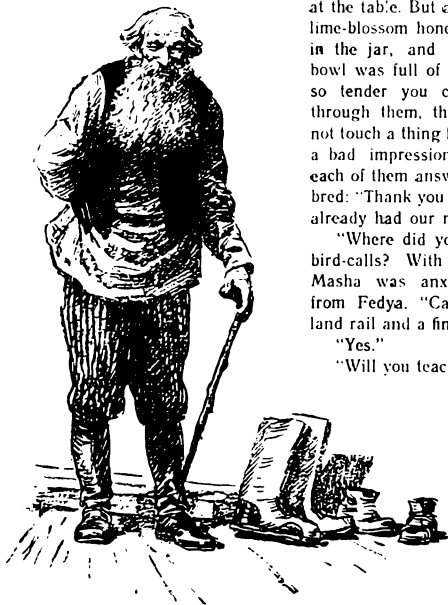
Thus they stood in front of each other, calling to each other with the voices of birds. It seemed to the children that all the birds in the region had flown together to Grandad's old cottage.

Then, ashamed of his childish pranks, the old man laughed in embarrassment, drew the boy towards him and embraced him.

The battered samovar was soon singing a song of its own on the table.

Grandad opened a tin of meat, got out a jar of honey, and some pickled cranberries, apples and mushrooms, and gave Fedya the place of honour. Then, looking round at the beaming faces of the children, he let his good nature completely master him.

"Sit down all of you. Enjoy yourselves. Nothing's too good for a day like this."



The children seated themselves at the table. But although the thick lime-blossom honey glowed golden in the jar, and the big wooden bowl was full of preserved apples, so tender you could almost see through them, the children would not touch a thing for fear of making a bad impression on Fedya, and each of them answered with a well-bred: "Thank you very much. We've already had our meal."

"Where did you learn all those bird-calls? With the partisans?" Masha was anxious to find out from Fedya. "Can you imitate a land rail and a finch?"

"Yes."

"Will you teach me?"

Alyosha Syomushkin persisted in trying to have a serious talk with Fedya about partisan life.

"Wait a while, hothead," Grandad restrained him, "let him have a rest after his journey. There'll be time enough later on for you to talk to your heart's content." And he looked intently at the boy.

Fedya had close-cropped hair. He was rather thin and seemed to be not very talkative.

"Never mind, the sun there must have dried him up a bit," Grandad reassured himself. "He'll fill out like a dumpling here." But the old man kept asking Fedya whether he did not feel a pain somewhere.

"I've got no pains anywhere, Grandad," was the answer. "I can heave a pood weight with my left hand. I've already had a wrestle with a chap at the station here."

"And how did you get on?"

"Well—he didn't play fair. He tripped me. But I wriggled myself free all the same."

"You see, you mustn't test your strength yet. You'll have a quiet, peaceful life here with me."

"We'll make him leader of all the children here," Masha unexpectedly declared, at last satisfying her desire to say something to please Fedya. "You'll see how we obey him."

"Your leader?" Grandad viewed the idea with disapproval. "My grandson's come here for a rest."

"I shall not be staying long, Grandad," said Fedya. "I want to enter a trade reserve school."

"So that's it!" the old man frowned. "He's hardly arrived, and he's already thinking of leaving. Why don't you take your time and have a look round. Perhaps you'll find another road in life."

The children would have stayed with Fedya well on into the evening, but Grandad Vekshin gave a timely hint that guests should not outstay their welcome. Thanking him for his hospitality they bade him farewell and set off for home.

Grandad saw them to the corner.

The frost, like a skilled glazier, had covered the pools with a layer of bristle ice; they shone in the moonlight like hot-bed frames.

Not far away, in the ditch by the roadside a little stream was

babbling tirelessly, as though it wanted to say that no frost could any longer stop the advancing spring.

Grandad felt spring had peeped into his house too—his grandson had come. Smiling to himself, the old man went back to his cottage.

He was expecting to have a quiet family talk with his grandson over another glass of tea, with no strangers worrying them. But there was to be neither talk nor tea. Fedya had made himself comfortable on the bench with his haversack under his head, and was fast asleep.

"My young nightingale's tired out," the old man whispered.

Sitting down beside the sleeping boy, he became engrossed in thought. Many a year had he lived in the world. How much land he had ploughed, how many meadows he had mowed, how many orchards he had grown! Bees loved him, horses understood him. The peasant's life had no secrets for him. But he had nobody to whose trusted hands he could bequeath his skill—he had neither sons nor grandsons.

And now there was somebody he could go to the fields with, somebody he could show how to till the soil, how to treasure every tiny grain of corn.

"I will not let him go anywhere," he mused. "I will make a good collective farmer out of him. Stozhari will be a home to him. Vekshin won't be forgotten in the village."

Suddenly the boy's lips moved in his sleep and he turned over. At that moment the old man heard something patter to the floor. He bent down with outstretched hand and out of the open haversack into his palm trickled a thin stream of seed.

He went to the lamp, turned up the flame and stood still in amazement. In his hand lay large glossy grains of corn.

The old man bent over the bench to wake up Fedya. But the boy was sleeping so sweet a sleep that he did not have the heart to do so. Instead he carried him over to the bed and covered him with a blanket.

Then he went back to the bench, got down on his knees and carefully gathered from the floor the scattered grains.

* * *

Next morning Fedya was awakened by a light hammering on wood. Grandad Vekshin was sitting in the doorway nailing together a wood-

en startling box. On the table was a little mound of wheat-seed. In the sunlight pouring in through the window the grains glowed as though they had been cast in copper.

Fedya jumped out of bed and looked in his haversack.

"So you know all about it already, Grandad!"

"I could hardly believe my own eyes!" the old man replied shaking his head. "It's nothing short of a miracle how that grain's come home again."

"Don't you remember, Grandad? You and I were going through a wood. Then the Germans caught you. But I had the haversack with the corn in it."

"But you have passed through so many hands since then, my little Fedya; you've been with soldiers, in hospital, in the sanatorium. And the grain is still safe. I just can't make it out. It's real magic!"

"You're right, it is magic. Everybody I tell how you and I saved the seed from the Germans says, 'It's lucky corn. It will live a hundred years.' Of course I took care of it too. I gave one wounded man in hospital ten little grains, because he asked me so. But only ten. He sent them home, somewhere in the Volga region."

Grandad went to the table and sifted the wheat between his fingers.

"So you've had enough roaming and rambling over the world, precious little grains. It's time to lie down in the earth, time to grow and bear ears."

He asked his grandson not to tell anybody about the wheat for the time being: it was old and he was not sure it would grow. "Be patient till summer, Fedya dear," he said. "When it grows into ears we shall give our people cause to rejoice."

CHAPTER 8

WITH HIS OWN EYES

Next day all the Stozhari boys knew about the "speed and daring" affair on the river. Alyosha Syomushkin saw to that.

During the midday recess he gathered half the class round him and solemnly assured them that he had seen with his own eyes how Vekshin's grandson dived into the icy water and rescued Masha Rakitina.

Not much credit was generally given to Syomushkin's tales at school, for he had always seen everything "with his own eyes"—where a shooting star fell, when a spring rose in the gully, and how the great oak-tree in Subotinskaya Forest had been split by lightning.

But Fedya Cherkashin's appearance had been so unexpected that this time the children listened to Syomushkin readily, without suspicion

"There's a chap for you!" Syomushkin spluttered with exaltation. "He sprang into the river like a tiger. And no wonder—he used to be a partisan!"

"And Konshakov? Where was he?" inquired Zina Kolesova.

"Konshakov! Bah! He's brave enough when he's with sheep. . . . As for Devyatkin, he really did show the white feather."

Syomushkin made the children roar with an imitation of Sanka and Petka at their wit's end, running along the bank and shouting: "Help! Save her!"

"He's making things up about us," Devyatkin whispered to Sanka.

They were standing under the birches in the school garden, watching the rooks that had come back to their nests of the year before cawing for joy.

Petka went over to the wood-shed where Syomushkin was "making things up," but Sanka pretended he was not interested in anything else but the rooks.

He was all ears, however. For a long time he had been aware that Syomushkin liked to spin all kinds of yarns about him; according to Syomushkin, Sanka cheated the younger boys at knuckle-bones and copied his sums from Masha. What was he dishing up to the chaps this time?

"The fuss they're making of that Cherkashin. It's terrible!" Devyatkin reported on his return. "Anyone would think you and I lured Masha on to the ice purposely and then abandoned her."

"Who says that? Cherkashin?" Sanka flared up.

"Syomushkin's spreading it . . . he and Cherkashin have chummed up together . . . they're thick as thieves."

All that day Sanka was fuming.

The boys thronged after Syomushkin, and he was always ready to

talk about Vekshin's grandson, adding fresh details every time. According to Syomushkin, Fedya was nothing less than a famous partisan scout, had been on eight or nine night sorties, had himself captured two nazis and had a battle scar on his side.

After school, as Sanka and his pals were going home, the conversation again imperceptibly turned to Fedya.

"There you go again!" Sanka burst out furiously. "Go on then, go and fawn on him."

The boys stopped by the bridge and fell silent. The river was almost free of ice, although its waters were turbid and still carried along a few belated floes.

"We'll soon be going fishing," said Styopa So-by-So.

"Syomushkin says he's going to stun the fish with a grenade," remarked Petka.

"Where did he get the grenade from?" Sanka pricked up his ears.

"Cherkashin promised him one. He brought it with him. He's got cartridges in his haversack too, and a German knife and a lot of other things as well. Alyosha saw them with his own eyes."

"Oh him . . . he's making it up," Sanka muttered and it was not clear whether his words referred to Syomushkin or to Fedya.

He was inwardly uneasy. What if all Syomushkin's gossip were only the truth? The chaps would follow Cherkashin like so many dogs.

Would anybody listen any more to Sanka's story of how he and his stepmother drove the cows and horses from the enemy, or how he saved Muromets? A bomb had fallen just by the stable. The old lop-lipped gelding, mad with fear, had lashed out with such violence that it knocked Sanka down, then tore off in the direction of the village. But Sanka did not lose his head and brought Muromets back. He still bore the trace of the gelding's hoofs on his chest. But whom could you astonish with a mark like that when Vekshin's grandson had a bullet scar on his side and a haversack full of cartridges?

"He talks a lot, does that Syomushkin. We must check on him ourselves," Sanka suggested.

The boys drew up their plan at once. They would wait on the bridge while Devyatkin went to Vekshin's cottage to wheedle out of Fedya all he could, for nobody could beat Devyatkin at getting round people.

"Mind you have a look in that haversack," Sanka instructed him.

Off went Devyatkin to the cottage, and peering in at the window to make sure that Grandad Vekshin was not in, he pushed open the door.

"Devyatkin will start singing like a nightingale now," Styopa sniggered. "He would sell his own mother and pretend to be your friend all the same."

About half an hour later Devyatkin came back.

"He's not at all that sort," he said in a bored tone. "He was washing the dinner dishes."

He reported that Fedya Cherkashin had turned out to be not at all the talkative kind and that he, Devyatkin, had not managed to get anything out of him.

It was true that Fedya had been in a partisan detachment, but his job there most of the time had been helping Grandad Vekshin to gather mushrooms and berries and get meals ready for the partisans.

"A cook, eh? And how many Fritzes did he capture?" inquired Sanka.

"Nought point nought! They wouldn't take him on a reccy. He was too young."

"Did you see his haversack? Any grenades in it?"

"Huh! Anything else you'd like?" guffawed Petka. "Not even cartridges. Only books."

"What else?"

"A mug and a spoon, shirts and some kind of grain."

"Grain?"

"Wheat or something."

"That Syomushkin caught us with whitebait," Sanka laughed with relief. And after that he felt calmer.

Soon Fedya went to school. He was put in the sixth class.

Study did not come easy to him; he had forgotten much of what he had learnt. But he worked with might and main so as not to lag behind his comrades.

* * *

After consulting Lena Odintsova, Masha called a muster of the Pioneers and told them that Tatyana Rodionovna herself had appointed them to work on Grandad Vekshin's plot.

The children were flattered. Zina Kolesova, who had a reputation for growing excellent tomatoes, Alyosha Syomushkin and five others volunteered to help Grandad. Fedya Cherkashin joined them too.

Immediately after the muster Masha took the children to Grandad Vekshin on his plot. The plot was behind the allotment and bordered by the river on one side, the coppice on the other.

The children waited by the fence while Masha and Zina entered the plot and peeped into the small greenhouse erected on the site of an old dug-out. Grandad was bending over his boxes, watering the seedlings.

"We've come, Grandad," Masha informed him. "What must we do?"

But Grandad's attitude to them was by no means inspiring.

"Are there many of you?"

"Nine. But we can get more, if you need them."

"More than nine?" exclaimed the old man. "What am I to do with so many of you? Two or three would be more than enough. And I want real keen ones too. I can take you, for example, Zina Kolesova."

"And the boys?"

"Out of the question. Locusts like them will be the end of everything, they'll trample the plot and eat away every plant."

Masha returned to the waiting youngsters and reported her conversation with the old man.

"So we're not keen, eh?" Syomushkin commented offensively.

The children decided to have a word with Lena Odintsova.

"He's an obstinate old fellow," Lena said thoughtfully. "You know what, children, you'll have to coax him. It's no use going to him with empty hands. You, Zina, show him your tomato seedlings. And you boys make a few feeding troughs for birds or starling boxes."

"We could put the fence up," suggested Syomushkin.

"We'll present him with clover seed. Don't you remember, Andrei Ivanich sent us some?" said Masha.

"We must collect seeds too," Fedya seconded her.

"What seeds?" asked Zina, puzzled.

"All kinds. Wheat, rye, vegetables. Grandad said that good sorts must be looked for seed by seed."

That day the children began collecting seeds. They went round the neighbouring collective farms and talked to agronomists, vegetable gardeners and experimenters, asking for specimens of the best sorts of seed. A week later they presented themselves before Grandad Vekshin with an impressive collection.

Alyosha Syomushkin was the first to display his finds. He turned out all his pockets and poured upon the table cucumber, turnip and cabbage seeds.

"I can bring you more," he said, "just say the word."

Grandad Vekshin armed himself with a magnifying glass and examined every sort at length. Then he started questioning Alyosha as to where he had found them, on what kind of soil they had been grown, what their yield was.

"I swopped them with the kids at school for nibs," Alyosha admitted awkwardly.

The old man swept all the seeds into a single heap.

"Wasted effort," he said. "I've no use for uncertified seeds. They're good for chicken food, that's all."

Masha and Fedya were luckier than the others. From the Loktevsk Collective Farm experimenter they had got ten grains of a rare sort of perennial rye and a pinch of huskless barley, and they were able to answer almost all the old man's questions. Grandad noted the history of each specimen in his note-book and put the seeds away in a little chest.

"Well, we'll sow them on trial, give them a try. Look for more if you feel like it. But use your brains; don't collect all sorts of common or garden seeds."

From then on, the children assembled more and more frequently in the "fairy cottage." Sanka was puzzled what attracted them there.

"Still listening to Fedya telling you what a great fighter he was?" he asked Masha one day. "How he used to make cabbage soup and mash?"

"No, we collect seeds."

"What seeds?"

"To sow. I've already found two sorts. I would have got more, but Grandad Vekshin rejects so many. He shows no mercy."

"What this? A new game you've invented?"

"A game? What do you mean?" was the offended retort. "We're helping Grandad Vekshin. Just look what I've got." She took out of her bag a few little packages of seeds. "That's pumpkin, that's Amur soya. The botany teacher gave me them."

"Hand over, let's try them." Devyatkin snatched a few pumpkin seeds out of a packet and popped them in his mouth. "Funny kind of pumpkin yours is: muggy and mouldy!"

"It's you that are mouldy!" Masha answered sharply, putting the packages away. "And I'll thank you to keep your hands off our selection seed stock."

"Seed stock?" sneered Petka. "For the mice to fatten on."

CHAPTER 9 ON THE COMMON

Spring was advancing with giant strides. The earth was carpeted with green grass. The larks trilled incessantly, soaring in spirals to the sky, and from the fields came warm invigorating air full of delicate fragrance.

It was amazing how long it took the children to get home from school those days.

They were drawn irresistibly to the edge of the forest, where the ants were already fussing about their reddish cone-shaped hills, and to the marshy river-banks where the first yellow flowers were breaking into bloom. The wood was still bare. Only the hazel-nut, alder and birch-trees were adorned with long woolly catkins, and the children, fending their way through the thicket, raised clouds of fine yellowish pollen.

In the fields the horse-tail was sprouting sturdy shoots and the youngsters liked to chew its juicy pink stems.

But most frequently the children lingered on the common. They would take off their boots, jackets and coats and engage in endless games of *lapta*, a hundred up at tip-cat, or twelve-figure *gorodki*.*

It was seldom Sanka Konshakov was not in the game.

His mother would send him to a neighbour's for salt. He would go out, see the boys playing *lapta* and frown with vexation. The elder ones would side up against the youngsters and often break the rules. It was more than Sanka could bear. "You're not playing the game!" he would shout.

Then the boys would form sides again—more even this time; and like a bubbling fountain the merriment of the players would burst out afresh.

Sanka, of course, was captain of his side; he would place the field and settle who was to bat after whom.

He invariably put himself last man in for the final stroke.

The first in would swing the club—and miss. The second would take a good aim—and miss too. The third would be no luckier. Sanka's turn would come. Dozens of eyes would be turned hopefully on him. Sanka was their captain, the one they all relied on; it was up to him to save the situation.

Sanka would show no hurry. He would take his time choosing a club to his liking. The rules gave the last player the right to three strokes. The first and second Sanka would strike with only half force. The ball would land not far from the base. The other team would jubilate—Sanka's side was obviously beaten.

But Sanka would keep calm. He would lay aside the light club with which he had been hitting, and would go to the fence and pull out of the earth a heavy stake. He would try it for a long time, spit on his hands and then suddenly shout, "Serve up!"

One of the players would throw the ball into the air. Seizing the stake in both hands, Sanka would make a great swing and gasp with exertion as he struck the last ball.

The springy rubber ball would soar so high that it seemed it would never come down again.

* A kind of skittle game.—Tr.

"He's saved us!" the boys would cry in triumph, dashing at full speed to the home line and returning to the base.

Sanka would be so taken up with the game that he would forget everything else on earth.

Then he would suddenly come to his senses, run home and, without batting an eyelid, tell his mother the neighbour had no onions.

"It wasn't onions I sent you for, it was salt," Katerina would say, with a gesture of despair.

"That's what I asked for—she hadn't any salt either."

One day the children tried a game called "Driving in the Stake." An aspen stake, sharpened to a point like a pencil, was stuck into the ground. Then a few birch logs were laid on the earth beside it. Sanka stood all the boys in a ring and started to pick out who would be "it."

Fedya Cherkashin joined them unexpectedly.

"Playing stakes? I know that game. But how do you decide who's "it"—do you draw or does someone volunteer? Ah, you count. Well, count me too." And he squeezed into the ring.

Sanka sized up the newcomer.

"All right, let's count him," Devyatkin agreed and, winking to Sanka, took over the job of chooser.

Everyone grinned, for they knew that if Petka wanted to make somebody "it" he always managed to do so.

Devyatkin walked round the ring, poking his fat finger in each boy's chest and mumbling the rhyme: An apple goes rolling—where I don't know. If you take it, then out you go."

The one on whom the last word fell had to step out. The ring got smaller and smaller until at last there were only two left in it: Petka and Fedya. For the last time Devyatkin mumbled "an apple goes rolling" so cleverly that Fedya had to be "it."

"Now mind," Sanka warned him, "you've got to play it out here; there's no asking for mercy."

"That's the only way I know of," asserted Fedya lying down with his face to the ground.

The boys ran to hide. When the voices and stamping of feet had died away, Fedya rose and knocked with a stick on the logs as a warning that he was starting to look for them.

He looked in the ditches, in the vegetable gardens and yards, rummaged in the bushes and, finding one of the players, would run back to the stake and tap it three times with his stick, whereupon the boy that had been found had to come out of hiding.

Sometimes Fedya went too far from the stake. Then the boys would rise as out of the ground and drive with the birch logs the stake deeper into the damp black soil.

Hearing the blows, Fedya would dash back, only to find that the others had already disappeared.

Then the search would start again.

At last they were all found.

"Pull the stake out now," Sanka reminded Fedya.

That was not so easy. The young green aspen stake had sunk into the ground to the very top. There was nothing to grip it by. Fedya found an iron rod and tried to loosen the earth.

"You can't do that, it's against the rules," Sanka checked him. "You've got to do it with your bare hands."

Fedya puffed and blew for about ten minutes without getting anywhere.

He had to start all over again. A fresh stake was stuck into the earth, and the game started anew. This time Fedya searched more attentively. He did not go far from the stake and kept a sharper lookout all around.

Sanka Konshakov was the most dangerous and wily of all the players. He hid in the most unexpected places.

Fedya failed to pull out the second stake too. Unluckily for him, he hurt his foot on a stone and began to limp.

"Ask for mercy, we'll grant it," Sanka said condescendingly.

"That's not a habit of mine," Fedya retorted.

Masha came running up.

"You've chosen a rookie for your victim, now you're happy," she shouted at the boys. She proposed to Fedya that she should play it out for him. "Most likely they are cheating. I'll soon show them up."

But Fedya refused her help. The game lasted until late in the evening.

Next morning, catching up with the limping Fedya on the way to school, Sanka said in a mocking tone:

"You didn't finish the game yesterday. You'll have to be 'it' again after dinner."

"Me?" asked Fedya, bewildered.

"Well, who else? We play fair. Styopa Karasyov was "it" for two weeks last summer, he even lost weight. And Devyatkin got the idea of complaining to his mother, so we cut him out of all our games."

After dinner Fedya went to the common again.

"Let's play stakes," he said, "I'll be 'it'."

"But you've got a bad foot," the boys replied, in astonishment.

"It was only a scratch, it's better now."

But the children were not keen on playing. They were just about to gather wood for a bonfire. Sanka had even brought a box of matches from home.

"All right," he said. "We'll let you off."

"In that case I consider I won out," was Fedya's answer.

The boys exchanged glances but said nothing.

Another time they got up a game of lip-cat. Styopa Karasyov joined in.

"So-by-So is 'it'... He was the last here!" the boys cheered.

Styopa was clumsy and too trusting; he had no cunning and was not well up in the rules of the game. The children used to take advantage of this and he was a regular loser. When they were playing lip-cat, the others made Styopa run till he was fagged out. When playing at war, he usually had the part of "a horse-drawn gun," and had to drag a jolly cart with a rusty mortar tube, which in the same battle served both as an anti-tank gun and a howitzer.

That day Pelka Devyatkin vented his spite on Styopa. Devyatkin planted his bulky frame in front of the circle drawn on the ground, and Styopa was quite unable to drive his cat into it.

The boys came to the conclusion that Styopa would be playing for the rest of evening.

Quite unexpectedly Fedya, who had been sitting on some logs watching the game, came up to the players and took the cat from Styopa.

"Have a rest," he said, "I'll play it out for you."

In a few minutes the cat dropped into the circle. Fedya offered Devyatkin another game. Devyatkin had to agree; it was not done to refuse after winning.

They played a game and Fedya was the victor. Then the fagging started. Fedya had a good eye and he struck the cat with such force that it went buzzing through the air and fell far beyond the road.

Petka patiently looked for it in the grass and took a long aim, trying to drive it into the circle.

But Fedya managed to hit it with his stick while it was still in the air—which was allowed by the rules—and sent it away on the other side, towards the vegetable gardens. The circle seemed to be shut off by an invisible wall.

Bubbling with mirth, the boys watched Devyatkin run from one side to the other. He puffed and grumbled to himself, and kept casting glances at Sanka. But all Sanka did was laugh—there was nothing you could say, it was a fair game, according to the rules.

Dusk began to fall.

"It's time to go home, let's put it off till tomorrow," Devyatkin pleaded.

"Beg Styopa for mercy, it's his game," said Fedya.

"Call the game off," muttered the embarrassed Styopa. "You needn't play tomorrow."

For the last time Fedya hit the cat and it zoomed across the evening sky to land far beyond the vegetable gardens.

"Oh, you!" said Devyatkin going up to Sanka. "Couldn't you stick up for your own side?"

"Serves you right. You shouldn't cheat."

"And to think we're relatives."

"Relatives my foot! Sitting in the same sun doesn't make us relatives," Sanka retorted with a grin.

CHAPTER 10

AT THE POST-OFFICE

When Timka Kolechkin, the post-boy, appeared in the village street with his bag full of letters and newspapers, Katerina would run out to meet him, drag him into her house and compel him to go through all the mail under her very eyes.

"But, Auntie Katerina, I remember quite well, there's nothing for you," Timka would say in a voice that for some reason sounded guilty.

"You just show me, perhaps you've forgotten."

But still there was no letter from Yegor.

Katerina went about depressed and silent. She was often pensive, and waited impatiently for every post. True, she still whiled away the evenings telling the children about the brave soldier Yegor's adventures, but without her former enthusiasm, and she repeated and often contradicted herself. Even Nikitka noticed that.

"But why is Daddy always killing the same nazi? It was one with red hair and a big chin today, just like yesterday and the day before. Is he so hard to kill?"

"Do I always say he has red hair?" It suddenly dawned on Katerina. "Oh well, they're all very much the same—they're all hateful."

One day Petka Devyatkin dropped in at the Konshakovs' and told Sanka that his mother was going to town next day with two carts, and was taking him with her. Petka's mother delivered the milk for the collective farm.

"Come with us, Konshak. Tomorrow's Sunday, you know. We'll go to the pictures and walk round the market."

Sanka decided such an opportunity was not to be missed. He looked inquiringly at his mother.

"Yes, Sanka, go." His mother consented gladly. "You can drop in at the post-office and ask if there are any letters."

"That's Timka's job."

"He's such a quiet chap, perhaps they don't give him all the letters. Speak sharper, shake them up a bit. Perhaps a letter from Dad

has fallen into a corner and been lying there ever since. Make them have a good look."

"All right, I'll go," Sanka agreed.

Next morning he helped the fumble-fingered Yevdokia to harness the horses. He put old Muromets's collar on and made the hame-straps and saddle-straps fast. At last they set off.

Sanka and Petka led with Muromets. Yevdokia followed on the second cart.

On the way they overtook Timka Kolehkin.

"Going to the post-office?" inquired Sanka. "Get on. We'll give you a lift."

Timka got on the cart, took off his broad peaked cap, and mopped the sweat from his brow.

"You've got a bit heated up, postie."

"Mine's a nasty job, Konshak."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it's like this: if there's a letter for folk from their husband or son at the front, it's all right. But a couple of days ago I brought Ulyana Knyazhkova news that her husband was missing. And her with five children on her hands. The day before yesterday it was Auntie Dasha: her son's been killed. Last week, it was one for the Voronovs. People avoid me like the plague nowadays. And I keep on remembering Dad too. No, let someone else fetch the letters."

"Well," Sanka sighed, "if you've been given the job, you've got to do it." After a while he asked: "What was your father in the war?"

"A sapper—that's another nasty job. He got blown up on a mine." Timka's eyelids quivered. "If my Dad was alive, I would still go to school. I'd be in the sixth class with you."

Sanka thought of his own father. For some reason he remembered one fine summer's day when the whole family had been on a visit to relatives in Loktevo.

Fenya, dressed up like a bride, with beads and ribbons, walked in front. Behind her came their father with Nikitka on his shoulder and Mother at his side, and last of all, Sanka. He was cross and would not talk to anybody. For the sake of the occasion his mother had made him put on new squeaking shoes with toe-caps that were far too long.

and his father, after promising to drive the whole family over in a cart, had taken them to Loktevo by a quiet field track instead.

Father walked slowly, now and again going up to his waist in the corn, running his fingers through the ears, and smiling.

"Mother, children! This is grand, isn't it? We'll be rolling in wheat this autumn."

Picking hollow stems, he started making whistles that sounded like birds singing; out of wheat stalks he made small pipes with a shrill plaintive note, out of branches of willow and broom, deafening horns. Then the whole neighbourhood was treated to a fantastic concert. The children hooted and whistled, or warbled like nightingales.

Then they entered the wood. Young and bright, it greeted the Konshakovs with the rustle of its foliage as though they were visiting its birches, aspens, and firs, instead of their friends in Loktevo. By some mysterious signs, the father found birds' nests and tracked out hedgehogs or squirrels, or, lying down by an ant-hill, he would tell of the laborious life of its inhabitants. Spell-bound, the children wandered on after their father. Sanka had long forgotten the vexation of the morning, his pointed shoes no longer pinched and he had collected a whole capful of birds' eggs. His clothes were draped in gossamer and besmeared with resin.

"But what about our visit, Yegor?" Katerina suddenly spoke up. "Come on, we are keeping them waiting." And looking at Father and children she clasped her hands together. "Why, I thought I made you all spick and span. And what do you look like now? Charcoal burners!"

"Nothing to cry over," Yegor laughed. "We are enjoying ourselves, anyhow."

... Towards noon the carts arrived in town. Yevdokia delivered her milk and gave the horses their feed. Then, taking her son with her, she set off for the market.

Sanka and Timka went to the post-office. On the way they looked at the pictures in the cinema announcement case, bought pink lollipops at a stall as presents for the kiddies, looked in at the stadium where Sanka and his father had once watched a football match. This time there was no football, but some youngsters were jabbing bayonets at dummies made of brushwood.

"Will they go to fight too?" Timka wanted to know.

"They're doing preliminary training," Sanka explained. "They're still only civies."

When the boys reached the post-office, the postmaster said, "Here come the Stozhari people. Your box is full up to the top." And he gave Timka a bulky package of letters and newspapers.

"Timka, isn't there a letter for us?" Sanka whispered. "Let's have a look."

Timka himself was dying to sort the mail. They went and sat on a bench in a garden square and started looking through the letters. There were post-cards, creased triangular-shaped letters from the front, and ordinary letters in envelopes made of newspaper.

"Marina Ivanovna Rakitina," Timka read, and saw himself that evening going to Masha's mother with that triangular missive.

Auntie Marina would take her time wiping her hands on her apron, carefully receive the letter on her outstretched hand and take it to the lamp. Then, checking herself, she would put an earthenware pot of milk in front of Timka, cut him a few large chunks of bread and urge him to make a meal. "If you won't eat to your own health, eat to Andrei Ivanich's. That he may have as much to eat as you and get better as soon as possible."

There was a letter Timka would take to the Kolesova's. Old Ivan would gather together his numerous family, invite the neighbours, adjust his spectacles on his nose and take a good hour over the reading of that letter from his tank-soldier son.

"Still none for us," Sanka sighed, wondering what he would tell his mother when he got home.

But what was that? His fingers drew out of the pack of letters a stiff white envelope. The type-written address stood out boldly: "Stozhari, Pushkin Collective Farm, Katerina Vasilievna Konshakova."

"Konshakova, Konshakova," Sanka repeated to himself. But why were the address and field post number typed, why was the envelope so neat, and the letter so thin and light? No, it was not from his father. His letters were generally thick and heavy, and the envelope sewn with unbleached thread.

Whom was it from then? His hands went cold, he looked distractedly round and his glance met Timka's.

"What's up, Sanka? What's the matter?" Timka asked in a low, anxious whisper. "Read it."

Sanka hesitatingly tore open the envelope.

"Your husband, Yegor Platonovich Konshakov, has died the death of the brave fighting for his country," he read.

* *

The whole way back Timka drove Muromets, and Sanka lay flat on his face in the cart.

They got back to Stozhari at twilight.

Sanka got down with an effort and went up to the horse; but it was some time before he was able to get the hame-strap off the collar.

Suddenly his face twisted with anguish and he pillowed his head on the horse's steaming neck, muffling a sob.

"Sanka . . . you mustn't." Timka started fussing about him. "Take a grip on yourself. You can't give way to tears like that. You know, when we were informed of Dad's death I hardly cried at all." There was a tremor in his voice. "At night, of course, just a bit, but before others . . . not a . . ."

Sanka shuddered at the thought of giving the death notification to his mother. She would stare with unseeing eyes at the piece of paper, then sink down on the bench and burst out in shrill heart-rending cries, just as Timka's mother had done. Fenya and Nikitka would run to her, cling to her skirt, and scream so that the whole street could hear them.

"No, anything but that," Sanka thought with terror. "I'd sooner run away and never show my face at home."

He could feel the crisp paper of the letter in the breast pocket of his tunic; through his tears he looked at fair-headed Timka. Then he glanced all round.

"Timka, what if I don't show Mother this notification?"

"What do you mean?" Timka was taken aback. "You can't hide things like that!"



"But perhaps there's some mistake. Wasn't Andrei Ivanich missing for two years, and now he's sent news."

"That does happen, of course," was Timka's evasive answer. Suddenly he tugged at Sanka's arm and nodded sideways: "Look—your stepmother."

Sanka shuddered and looked round. Katerina was coming quickly past the sheds towards the stable. He hurriedly wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, nearly broke his nails loosening the end of the hame-strap that had got jammed, pulled the shaft bow out of the loops, and led the horse out of the shafts.

"The first she will ask about will be the letter," said Timka, shuddering at the thought.

Sanka put his face close to his comrade and, with unexpected firmness, whispered:

"I won't show her, that's all. And don't you say anything. There was no letter, and that's the end of it. Understand?"

He drew a deep breath, but the lump in his throat choked him again. His mother was quite close. Feeling as though at any moment he would scream at the top of his voice, Sanka whipped Muromets

with the reins. The horse bounded forward, stamping with its heavy iron-shod hoof on the boy's foot.

Sanka felt a stab of pain in his foot, gave a yell, let the reins go and hopped on the other foot to the cart.

"What have you done?" asked Timka springing to his side.

Katerina ran up to him.

"Trampled him with its hoof! My poor boy!" She fell down on her knees before her son and cautiously pulled off his boot.

"That animal's got no sense left at all . . . lashing out at a fellow," Sanka complained with a threatening gesture at Muromets who, with hanging head, was standing by the stable as though trying to make out why the boy had treated him so unjustly.

With Timka's help Katerina took Sanka home, put a fomentation on the swollen foot and bandaged it in an old towel. Fearing that his mother would at any moment ask about the letter from his father, Sanka pretended that the pain was quite unbearable and kept moaning and crying.

But Katerina asked him all the same.

Sanka shook his head. "I didn't get any, there wasn't any for anybody."

And from the photograph on the wall, his father was looking down on him. There he was, big and jolly, in front of the house with Katerina and the children. There he was in Moscow, at the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition, a tall sheaf of wheat by his side.

And now? Never would Sanka see his father any more. Never would they go together to see the wheat in the field, or to mow the hay in the meadow. Nobody would so skilfully make him whistles and pipes, take him to the wood to the places where the mushrooms grew, sing such lovely songs about Siberia or the Volga, or about the coachman and his speedy *troika*.

And Sanka felt so unhappy, so lonely, that he burst into tears again.

"Be a little braver, do. . . I thought you were a man. The horse didn't kill you," Katerina said with a bitter sigh. "Oh you helpless things! If anything happens to Yegor, how shall we manage?"

Sanka was put to bed.

When his mother went out, Timka looked round and then bent over Sanka.

"I saw you. You got under the horse's hoofs on purpose."

"Timka!" Sanka raised himself a little and grasped the other boy's hand. "Don't you tell anybody about the letter. Swear you won't, Timka."

CHAPTER 11

SOIL

For three days the warm spring rain poured down. It swilled from the earth the last traces of its long winter sleep and all around everything became alive and green, shooting up with luxuriant growth. The willows and osiers by the river decked themselves with tender leaves that made them look as if they were draped in transparent muslin.

On the very first fine morning Grandad Vekshin decided to start digging his plot. As he dressed, he took care not to waken Fedya, who lay curled up under his blanket.

The old man had purposely not wakened Fedya. He wanted to see whether the boy was afraid of hard work, or whether he felt the call of the earth and would come on his own accord to the plot.

Before leaving the house Grandad went up to Fedya to cover him with his sheepskin coat. Then he discovered that there was nobody under the blanket. Feeling rather worried, the old man went to his plot. While he was still some distance away, he noticed a dense column of smoke. He hastened his step.

In the middle of the plot a huge fire was blazing. Masha and Zina Kolesova were busy around it, burning the runners from the previous year's cucumbers, brown withered tomato plants, and other rubbish they had gathered from all over the plot.

The boys, with Fedya in command, were mending the fence, straightening up sagging stakes and connecting them with fresh interwoven twigs.

"A-ha-a!" Grandad uttered a long exclamation of surprise. "Being independent, are you? Think you can run things yourselves, eh?"

There was a sudden gust of wind, and in a corner of the plot something began to creak.

The old man looked around. A tall scarecrow was nodding a broad-rimmed straw hat and waving straw arms at him.

The old man walked round it, shaking his head.

"Thought of everything, the young sticklers!"

Then he heard the twitter of birds. On the white branches coal-black starlings were hopping about round new starling boxes. One of the birds popped into a round opening and, reappearing a minute later, perched itself on a bough of a birch-tree, ruffled its feathers, blinked blissfully and screeched out a song. Probably it was telling how it had come back from warmer climes to its native land, and how satisfied it was with its new abode.

Shading his eyes from the sun with his hand, Grandad Vekshin listened for a long time to the starling, his face brightening more and more as he did so.

"Grandad," said Masha running up to him, "when shall we start digging? We've sharpened our spades."

Grandad ran his eyes over the children, rumbled his curly white beard and could not help smiling. "Well, what am I to do with you? There's no putting you off anyhow. It looks as if you've beaten me. You want to know when to start digging? Look, the starlings are having their house-warming. That means the time has come. But mind you"—the smile disappeared from the old man's face—"if you start fooling or damaging anything, I'll dismiss you on the spot."

"Did you all hear that?" Masha inquired, turning to the children.

"That goes without saying," was Syomushkin's answer.

"If you need any tools, don't be shy; take them out of the green-house."

"But it's locked, Grandad, and you always hide the key," Masha remarked.

"So it is!" the old man laughed, and showed the children where he put the green-house key.

Then he lined the children up along the plot and they started digging.

Fedya took a firm grip on his spade, drove it into the rich crunching earth, turned over a heavy clod and broke it up.

Next to him was Masha. It was the kind of work she liked. Every spring her mother would set aside for her a bed in the vegetable garden which Masha herself dug and sowed. Cucumbers and cabbage were of little interest for Masha. She wanted to grow something out of the ordinary, something they had never seen in the village. On Andrei Ivanich's advice she had once sowed some seeds with the mysterious name of *loofah*. When the plant began to grow it twined round the wattle fence like a hop, bloomed with large white flowers and bore fruit similar in appearance to cucumbers. But in autumn the new cucumbers turned out to be tough, stringy and uneatable; even the cows turned up their noses at them.

The children made fun of Masha, and sang songs about her *loofah* until the teacher advised her to put the fruit into a pot of boiling water. They softened, and when Masha took them out of the pot, they looked very much like sponges.

"That's not so bad after all. You didn't get your vegetables, but those sponges will come in handy in the house," said her mother appreciatively.

... For an hour and a half the children worked on the plot and then ran off to school.

Masha made up her mind to have a word with Sanka that day without fail. But he was not at school. Somebody said a horse had crushed his foot and he had to remain at home.

After school Masha went to the Big End, to the well; for the water there was the purest and tastiest and, besides, she could look in at the Konshakovs' on her way.

The girl fastened the end of the cold clanking chain to the handle of the pail and, braking the rapidly revolving windlass with the flat of her hand, lowered the pail to the bottom of the well. Then she started to wind the pail up again. But at once she felt that something had gone wrong; the chain was not vibrating and twanging like a taut bow-string, as it usually did.

Masha looked down into the well and her heart sank: there was no pail on the end of the chain. The girl was distressed, for it

was a new shiny pail; her mother had only recently bought it in town.

Presently Syomushkin came along.

"Lost your pail? Don't worry, we'll have it up in a jiffy."

He went and got a hook from somewhere, tied it to the end of the chain and started dragging it around the bottom of the well.

The youngsters from the Big End gathered round. Devyatkin came rushing up, as though he had scented an opportunity of displaying his sarcasm; Sanka came too, limping and leaning on a stick.

They all peered into the deep, mysterious well, gave each other lots of advice, let down the hook time after time, but did not manage to secure the pail.

"That's the wrong bait, you're fishing with," jeered Devyatkin. "Try a fly or a worm." Then he struck up a stupid song: "I lost a little pail, a lovely little pail. . . ." "Let's all weep for the pail!"

"It's a fact, Masha," Syomushkin sighed despondently, "we can't get it out."

"You're a fine lot, you are!" Masha retorted reproachfully. "If I were a boy, I wouldn't let a well beat me. Why, I'd get that pail even if it was at the bottom of the sea."

"There's spirit for you," guffawed Devyatkin. "From the bottom of the sea. Aye, so long as it was knee-deep and no bigger than your hankie."

"You keep your rotten remarks to yourself," Masha flared up. "If I want to get it out I will."

"Hold me up!" scoffed Devyatkin, sprawling on the ground and kicking his legs in the air. "She'll get it out! Like she crossed the river during the thaw. Witty, isn't she!"

Masha's lips were quivering.

"Listen to me," she shouted. "Just tie the chain round me and let me down into the well."

The boys gasped. Styopa pulled her by the arm, shaking his head.

Masha herself understood that she was taking too much on, but it was too late to stop. She seized the chain and started tying it round her waist like a belt.

Sanka had been sitting aloof all the while, poking his stick into the ground. He rose suddenly, looked into the well, then took the chain away from the girl and said curtly to Devyatkin:

"Go and get a log."

"What kind of log?"

"Birch, or aspen if you like. But mind it's smooth. Get a move on!"

Devyatkin shrugged his shoulders and pouted, but went for the log all the same.

Sanka tied the chain round the log, sat astride it, took the hook in his hand and told the boys to let him down into the well.

The chain creaked as it was slowly lowered. Somewhere down below, the green water shimmered mysteriously. There was a cold draught, and a smell of mould and rotten wood. Darkness gathered round Sanka, and his heart stopped beating. For some reason he started thinking that all those he had left up there in the sun would now run away and he would be left in the narrow stuffy well.

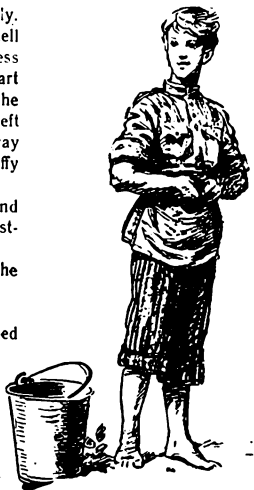
To allay his fear Sanka now and then gave orders to those above: "Faster!" "Steady there!"

The hook at last splashed in the water.

"Hold it!" cried Sanka.

The chain stopped and Sanka started dragging the hook over the bottom of the well. About ten minutes later the boys hoisted Sanka up. In his hand was the shining tin pail.

The boy stepped on to the ground. Everything around him—



the green grass in the lane, the sun overhead, the leaves on the trees rustling in the wind—looked so gay and attractive that he could not help blinking.

Masha thought it was the cobwebs on his face that had got in his eyes, and she went up to him with the pail of water.

"Have a wash, Sanka."

When the crowd round the well broke up, Masha could not restrain herself and ran after Sanka.

"Sanka," she said, and paused. "I couldn't have gone down that well for worlds. It's so dark and slimy. There are probably toads in it."

"I knew you couldn't."

She cast a sidelong glance at his bandaged foot:

"They say a horse kicked you. Does it hurt, Sanka?"

"It'll be better soon."

"When it gets better, will you come to work with us on the plot?"

"Messing about with vegetable beds?" he said with a mirthless grin. "Growing flowers and berries? Or are you going to grow some more sponges?"

"Why bring that up?" Masha complained, looking hurt. "We'll be experimenting with different kinds of seeds. If only you knew how many we've collected! And Grandad's found a kind of wheat that he says will beat any other."

"There was a time when we had fine seed. You heard what my mother did with it? How can you experiment on nothing?"

"But your father, Sanka."

"What about my father! What d'you know about him?" Sanka jerked his whole body round to Masha. "He was ploughing before he was thirteen to feed his family. He stuck to the earth his whole life. He fought five years to raise that wheat of his."

"Five years. . . . So can we," she said with fire.

"Ten if you like. It's nothing to do with me." And with eery gesture he leaned on his stick and limped off home.

"What's come over him?" Masha wondered, bewildered at his unexpected outburst. "He's as bristly as a hedgehog. Won't listen to anyone."

"Vekshin's Brigade," as Grandad Vekshin's helpers were called on the farm, went to the plot almost every day.

They turned up the whole plot, marked it out in rectangles like a sheet of paper, and made vegetable beds.

They mended the fence, put up a hut, and stretched over the plot a wire, hung with empty tins, bottles and barrel hoops. As soon as anybody opened the gate a little the whole plot started ringing, jingling and clinking merrily.

One after the other the Big End youngsters were joining Vekshin's Brigade.

One day Sanka and Petka met Styopa So-by-So.

He was carrying a huge bundle of the previous year's sunflower stalks to the plot, bending under the burden.

"So they've recruited you too?" inquired Devyatkin, barring his path. "As a porter, or what?"

"What's this, Styopa?" Sanka asked. "We were going to work in the fields together and look what you've let yourself in for."

"You see, Konshak," Styopa explained, dropping his bundle and wiping his perspiring face. "Fedya's had a fine idea: we're laying a water main."

"A water main!"

"We're going to join together all these sunflower stalks and lay them to the river. There we'll fix up a barrel that we can fill with a well-sweep. The water will flow by itself then. We won't be afraid of any drought now. Fedya and I are inventing a hand-worked cultivator too."

"Inventors invent things, but what are you?" Devyatkin commented.

But Styopa pretended not to hear him.

"You just watch your step," Devyatkin warned Styopa in a severe tone. "Next you'll be showing that Fedya where we go fishing, where we get our mushrooms, and taking him for berries in our secret places. Mind, I am warning you!"

"A lot he needs your mushrooms," Styopa said with a laugh. "He can find anything you can think of. You don't know what eyes he's got. He was telling us about herbs for healing yesterday—which ones stop

bleeding and which heal wounds. He and Grandad used to cure the partisans with them when they were in their detachment."

"Well, inventor, throw your wares to the winds," Devyatkin said sternly, starting to untie the cord round the bundle.

"Lay off!" Sanka ordered. "Let him have his fun. It's his business." Devyatkin shook his head disapprovingly.

"What's made you so soft, Konshak? All our chaps will be going over to Fedya's side."

But Sanka did not seem to notice Devyatkin's disgruntled face.

CHAPTER 12

ONE GOOD TURN...

Grandad Vekshin had been away since morning and Fedya decided to do the washing.

He got water from the well and fine sand from the river and made a wisp out of bast matting.

Then he soaked his soiled tunic, spread it out on a flat stone near the porch, strewed sand over it, soaped it a little and started scrubbing furiously with the wisp. Lather flew about, and bubbles, every colour of the rainbow, burst all round.

Fedya was in a hurry; there was no telling when Masha would come; she would naturally want to help, or even teach him, and he liked to wash in his own way.

"What a washerwoman, what a housewife!" he suddenly heard a voice say behind him. "If you go on rubbing like that you'll wear the stone away, let alone your shirt."

Fedya looked round. Behind him was Katerina Konshakova.

"Who's ever heard of anybody washing clothes like that?"

"I have," replied Fedya somewhat offended. "We all did it that way in our detachment. It gets the clothes clean and takes less soap."

Katerina shook her head, remembering a recent conversation with Grandad. The old man told her that Fedya's mother, a brigade leader at Visokoye State Farm, had been captured by the Germans as she was burning corn, and had been thrown into the fire.

"What are you looking at me like that for?" asked Fedya rising, his awkwardness on noticing Katerina's intent gaze making him ill-mannered.

"Nothing . . . I didn't mean to," said Katerina coming back to reality. "How are you and Grandad getting along here?"

"We're getting on fine."

Katerina went into the house. The floor was only half washed, the stove front was black with soot, dishes were standing dirty on the table.

"Two orphans keeping each other company, an old one and a young one," Katerina thought, moved with pity; then she threw off her wadded jacket and beckoned to Fedya.

"Come along, let's do it together. We'll warm some water and scrub the floor. You and Grandad aren't living in the woods now. It will soon be May Day too. And here's Masha coming to help," she said, noticing the girl running across the street.

When Grandad returned home, Katerina was already hanging the washing out to dry.

The time-blackened table had been washed, the floor scrubbed and covered with a pleasant-smelling bast mat.

"What's all this community help?" Grandad asked, stopping with a frown in the doorway. "Suppose I don't want it?"

"One good turn deserves another, Zakhar Mitrich," replied Katerina, and turning out the pockets of her jacket she



emptied some grains of wheat upon the table. "Look what grain I got for the sowing—it's all oats. I've put it through the sorter twice and just can't get rid of it. How can you sow grain like that?"

The old man put on his spectacles, passed the grain through his fingers for a long time, and agreed that there was little sense in sowing such drossy grain.

"What's your advice, Zakhar Mitrich? What's to be done?" Katerina asked.

"What did Yegor Platonovich do? Try to remember. The grain was good as it was, but he sorted it all by hand. Took out even the smallest mole. That's the way to get a good harvest."

"That's what Mum did too," said Fedya in a low voice, picking out of the heap of corn some rough silvery grains of oats.

"I thought of that," Katerina admitted. "If we had got the grain earlier, I should have sorted it long ago, no matter what trouble it cost me. But now—sowing time's near."

It was hard to say who first nudged the other, but with a glance at each other Masha and Fedya went aside into a corner.

"You thought of it too?" Masha asked in a whisper. Fedya nodded.

"Count how many children we can get together."

"Fifteen to twenty to begin with."

"Let's tell them so."

They went up to the table.

"Auntie Katya," the girl began, "we can get a lot of children together..."

"There's nothing very tricky about sorting grain. We'll manage," added Fedya.

Katerina looked up and cast a glance of astonishment at Masha and Fedya and then transferred her glance to Grandad Vekshin.

"Quite true, of course." And the old man smiled as much as to say: "I know those children, if anybody does."

"If you want to, you're welcome," Katerina answered gladly. "But there's school too. You'll soon have your examinations."

"But we'll do it after lessons, it won't interfere," Masha said.

Though the next day was Sunday, Katerina got the collective-farm women up early and took them to the granary to sort the wheat.

Sanka and Fenya went to help their mother.

Fenya set to work eagerly, but Sanka hardly moved his fingers, and sat staring gloomily at the heap of grain.

"What's the matter with him? Doesn't he like the work or is he sickening for something?" his mother thought uneasily. "He's been going about so done-up the last few days."

She whispered to him: "Perhaps you've got a lot of home-work; if you have, you'd better go and do it."

Sanka looked up. Of course! This work was boring, and would take endless time. It would be better to go to the stable or the smithy. It was far more interesting there.

But before he could get up, Masha and Fedya came into the granary at the head of a large group of boys and girls. They sat down round the heap of grain and set to work.

"Was it you that got them all together?" Fenya asked her brother in a low voice.

Sanka pretended not to have heard what she said. He, too, was surprised to see so many volunteers. Who had hit upon the idea of calling them together? Could it really be Fedya and Masha?

Masha squeezed in between Sanka and his sister, raking off a heap of grain for herself.

"Bet I can go faster than you, Sanka!" And her fingers started nimbly picking out the oats from the wheat.

Sanka moved aside without a word.

"What are you forcing yourself for?" Katerina asked Sanka, bending over to him. "If you've got to go somewhere, go. We'll manage now."

Sanka suddenly felt how hard it would be for him to get up and make even a few steps away from the granary.

"I haven't got to go anywhere," he said, bending down low over the corn.

"Auntie Pelageya," said Masha to Kolechkina, who was singing a drawling, dreary song, "don't you know anything else? Something a bit more cheerful. Or if you like we'll sing one of our own."

"That's right," Katerina supported her. "Start off."

Masha nodded to Zina Kolesova, and Zina, taking a good breath, struck up "Katyusha," in a voice which, though not strong, was very clear.

For three days Fedya and Masha's company went to the granary after school. At last the corn was sorted down to the last grain. Katerina did not know how to thank her unexpected helpers. "Wait till the harvest, I'll treat you to pies and muffins, I'll brew some pop for you," she promised them.

"That's what we like," Syomushkin winked to the others. "Styopa can drink a whole jug in one go."

The Young Pioneers walked with Lena Odintsova through the village, feeling elated after working so well. Darkness was gathering, lights were going on in the windows.

"We certainly put a spurt on," Syomushkin boasted. "I'm sure I sorted a million of those grains."

"A million!" Styopa said with a grin. "And how many did you chew?"

"That was a good idea of yours, about the wheat," Lena remarked.

"D'you know what?" Fedya stopped all of a sudden. "Let's help Katerina's brigade all the time, right up to the harvest!"

"Oh yes, let's!" Masha agreed eagerly.

"Now don't forget Grandad," Lena reminded them. Then she asked the children how they were getting used to working at "Vekshin's outfit."

"We're beginning to get on all right," Masha answered. "Grandad has even shown us where he keeps the green-house key."

"He's a terrible fault-finder, is Vekshin," Syomushkin declared.

"No he isn't, he just likes a job to be done properly," Masha objected. "And so he should. Yesterday he gave you a bed to weed, and you ran off to the river before you'd half finished."

"But you know how scorching the sun was. You've got to cool off sometimes."

"Sometimes! You were catching crayfish till dark."

"Grandad Vekshin is fond of order," Lena said with a laugh. "We felt like that, too, when we worked with him. We thought at first that he liked to nag. But today we know from experience what good it

did us. He's a wonder-worker, is Grandad. He's been working sixty years on the land and he knows every grass and herb there is. Listen to him as you do to your teacher at school, and remember all his advice."

A shimmering star shot across the sky and fell somewhere beyond the jagged crest of the wood.

The children followed its flight and, with heads thrown back, gazed for a long time at the sky where bright stars were beginning to shine, as on the crown of a mighty tree.

"Used Andrei Ivanich to tell you about the stars?" Lena asked in a subdued tone.

"Often," came the answer from Styopa.

"Can you find the Stozhari* constellation?"

For a long time the children wandered among the silvery labyrinth of the constellations, got lost, found their way back to the Great Bear and set off on their quest again.

"I can see it, I can see it!" Masha was the first to shout. "There they are, the Stozhari, seven little stars. Andrei Ivanich always said: 'Our village is lucky—it's named after a star-cluster.'"

And when they were tired of looking at the stars, the children started talking about the war, the Red Army, and of whether the day was far off when their fathers and big brothers would come back to their native Stozhari.

CHAPTER 13

THE ORIGINAL CAUSE

Katerina went on waiting impatiently for a letter from Yegor. She never missed a chance of asking anybody going to town to drop in at the post-office and speak as firmly as possible with the staff about the way they had of losing letters from soldiers.

"Your mother's a queer woman," Devyatkin once said to Sanka.

"You're the queer one," Sanka answered angrily. "If your mother

* A popular name for the cluster of stars known as the Pleiad.—Tr.

hadn't had a letter for so long, you'd be asking the birds to fly there and see what had happened!"

Fearing that his mother might come across the death notification, Sanka always carried it about with him, in his breast pocket, and when he went to bed, laid his tunic under his pillow.

He now took little interest in outdoor games and amusements.

Neither the ring of ball against bat, nor the whizz and thud of a game of *gorodki*, nor the triumphant roar of the winning side could bring the lad out of his torpor.

"I say, what's the matter with you?" Timka would reproach Sanka worriedly when Sanka would walk past and not even stop to play with them, or, against all the rules, leave a game in full swing.

In his endeavours to divert Sanka's thoughts to another subject, Timka would relate how the day before they had very nearly beaten Alyosha Syomushkin's team at *lapta*.

"We'd have been sure to win, only we had to rely on Devyatkin to get us home. And what kind of a batsman is he? Now if you had been there——"

Sanka would look away in silence. He realized that a lot of people had their troubles, but that made it none the easier for him.

There were moments, however, when his grief seemed to abate. The splitting blows of axes and the swish of saws by cottages that were built, the ring of iron in the forge, and the neighing of horses in the meadow made him forget his loss for a while.

After school he would linger for a long time near the forge, or run to the stables.

He would help the stable attendant Vasilisa Sedelnikova unharness the horses after work; then he would mount his old friend Muro-mets and drive them out into the fields for the night.

Knowing that the horses were tired after the day's work, Sanka had feeling for them, and only when they had almost reached the herd, would he give in to his desire to gallop them.

Then he imagined that it was not he, but his father with his squadron, who was racing over the green meadow, brandishing his sabre and lashing out at the fascists.

Sedelnikova at first used to get angry with Sanka.

"All the horses will be broken-winded with a Cossack rider like you," she would say.

But as she saw that the boy was fearless and trusting in his attitude to the horses, and that he was well acquainted with their habits, her wrath gave way to good-will.

"Ask to be made my assistant, Sanka. I'll appoint you stable-boy and put you down for wages."

Pucking up courage, Sanka asked his mother to let him go to work in the stables.

"The old story again," his mother said, frowning. "Don't you get ideas in your head. Until you've finished the seventh class, I'll not allow you to go anywhere. What were your father's orders? To sell the last piece of clothing, to slaughter the cow, if it came to that, but give you an education at all costs."

Sanka became pensive. It was true. His father had often said: "Sanka, you were born with a good head on your shoulders. You've got to study and study." He liked to ask his son about his home-work, and used to look at his exercise-books and offer to do his sums.

"It makes no difference," he would say, "that we didn't do the like in my time. . . . I'll reason it out all right."

But once he had solved the problem, the father was in no hurry to prompt his son. He would just say with a sly grin:

"You think I'll tell you, do you? Not a bit of it. Sweat over it yourself. Don't expect everything to be done for you."

His father took special pleasure in the poems by Pushkin, Koltsov and Nekrasov that Sanka used to learn. They cheered him like good old acquaintances and he himself often recalled a few lines from Nekrasov:

*He saw his father dress the field,
And scatter the grain in the mellow earth,
He saw the green the earth did yield. . .*

"There, my boy, it's branded in my memory. It'll stay there for ever."

Later Sanka noticed, not without pride, that it was getting harder and harder for his father to compete in knowledge with him.

"You're outstripping me," his father admitted. "Well, go ahead, son. Try to reach the summits of science. Your mother and I won't grudge you anything."

But of what use would all that be to Sanka now, if his father never saw his work.

Sanka did not dare to disobey his mother, but though he did not go to the stable he did not give up his plans and was never idle for a minute.

He would go fishing, or go to the woods and rip the bark off lime-trees, and then put it to soak in the pond, and plait cords out of the fibre. He was impatient for summer when he would be able to gather mushrooms and berries and capture a swarm of bees. It sometimes happens that bees get lost, come flying up no one knows where from, and settle on a tree or a cottage roof. Then it's a case of looking sharp!

Sometimes Sanka cut willow switches by the river and set to work making baskets and fishing reels.

But he found it dull to work alone, so he invited Timka Kolechkin and Vanya Strokin to work with him.

Timka's was not an easy life either. He went for the post twice a week on foot and then delivered it all over the collective farm. He had enough work at home too. He dug the vegetable garden, gathered twigs for the goat, chopped fire-wood, fed his little sisters, and several times a day drove out to the herd the red calf, which was so stupid that it would run back half an hour later and hide in the barn.

The boys often picked on Timka, who was weak and shy, and he seldom went out to play.

But for some time it had been impossible to offend or trick the trustful Timka. Behind his back would always appear Sanka, scowling and dishevelled.

"You look out!" Sanka would say in an ominous tone, putting his hands behind his back and stepping up to Timka's offender.

The boys knew that it was better not to argue with Konshak once he had said that.

Sanka became more and more attached to the quiet, fair-headed Timka, and that strange friendship surprised everybody.

After school Sanka would go to the Kolehkins' and help Timka with his work, and the other boys often saw Sanka and Timka taking the runaway calf back to the herd. Then Sanka would pore over his lessons with Timka sitting beside him, looking over his shoulder and sighing because he was so far behind Sanka.

Sanka and Timka's baskets turned out crooked and clumsy at first, but the collective-farm women were glad of them and paid for them with bread, potatoes or milk.

Orders poured in; some needed a basket for the washing, some for hay.

Petka Devyatkin, hearing about Sanka's profitable undertaking, asked to become his partner and offered his double-bladed knife for use free of charge.

But a day later he declared that they were selling the baskets too cheap, and that the price ought to be raised.

"What next?" Sanka objected. "Are we going to haggle with our own folk?"

Then he began looking after the vegetable garden.

This was how it started. Yevdokia Devyatkina and Petka had dug up all their own allotment and a fair portion of the farm's meadow land with it.

"What are you going to do with all that?" Sanka once asked Petka Devyatkin. "You'll bust yourselves with land!"

"Hee-hee," Petka replied with a grin. "A vegetable garden's a good thing to have these days. They've all got one in town now."

Sanka looked at his own family's allotment. His mother worked almost all day in the fields, and only half the allotment had been dug up.

Sanka set to work digging. He continued until late in the evening and got so tired that he nearly fell asleep at the supper table.

Next morning he woke up long before school time and went to the garden again. He was greeted by the cheerful rustling of the old hollow lime-trees that separated the 'Konshakovs' allotment from that of the Devyatkins'. Spring had made them young again and they were decked in thick green foliage. A little way off was a bird-cherry tree.

It was huge and white, like a cloud that had got caught in the hedge and could not fly away. .

Beyond the bird-cherry tree, in the far corner of the allotment, a young poplar reached up towards the sky. Sanka's father had planted it when the boy was in the first class.

"There's your friend," his father had said. "I'll see which of you grows faster and which will take deeper root in the earth."

The poplar was a weakling and did not take root for a long time, but later it put out shoots and was now a tall slender tree.

But what was Petka doing by Sanka's friend the poplar?

Sanka looked closer and ran to the young tree. Petka had already managed to dig up a good slice of the Konshakovs' allotment and, having reached the poplar, was in the act of cutting through the roots with his spade.

"Hey! What are you doing?" Sanka gasped.

"It won't do it any harm, it's a tough tree." Petka grunted. "Nothing but burdock will grow in your garden anyhow."

That was more than Sanka could put up with. He snatched the spade out of Petka's hands and, swinging it high, threw it into some nettles.

"Get out! Get out of our allotment!"

Petka did not get out, however. Suddenly he seized Sanka's spade. Sanka rushed to get it back, and the two boys rolled over in the loose-dug earth.

Yevdokia and Katerina came running out of their cottages and managed to break the two friends out of their tussle.

Katerina could not help laughing when she heard that the quarrel had started over the poplar-tree.

"You silly boy. Let them dig to their heart's content. They are just out for all they can get. I've no time to think of the garden now, Sanka," she said as she looked at the black squares of ploughed farm land. "There's our hope, the source of our strength."

All the same, Sanka decided not to let the Devyatkins have their own way on his allotment; he went on obstinately with his digging. Then he put the toppling fence in order, packed the wood that was

lying about in an orderly stack, and repaired the rickety steps up to the porch.

In the evening, Sanka always tried to go to bed last of all. He would go out, make sure that neither the pail nor the rope had been forgotten in the porch, and try the gate to see that it was bolted properly.

When Nikitka and Fenya started making too much noise in the house, or quarrelling, Sanka would shout sternly at them:

"Not so much nonsense, you kids! Wait till I come and take you in hand!"

Once at dinner he gave Nikitka a resounding smack for startling his meal before he was allowed.

"What's your hurry? Wait till you're told," he said. Then he tapped on the edge of the dish saying: "You can start now."

After school Sanka would come straight home, rarely staying behind to play outside.

"What a stay-at-home you've become, Konshak," said Petka loftily. "Always warming your toes by the stove."

"It's all right for you. When you come home from school, everything is ready and served. You can go and play till midnight," Sanka retorted angrily. "But I'm responsible for the house. I've got to keep an eye on everything."

As a result of all Sanka's new undertakings and cares, school was pushed into the background. When he got home Sanka would hurry through his home-work; and sometimes he would not even open his books, though study had never been a burden to him. He had always learned with ease, greedily devouring books and taking a delight in surpassing his comrades. The only thing that had ever hindered him was his impatience. Sanka always wanted to know beforehand what the teacher was going to say next day, what new page would be opened before him. It was the same as in his earlier childhood, when Sanka, still quite a baby, had left the house to see what was outside the village. And from there he had been attracted to the river, and from the river to the hillock. Sanka had wandered on and on until his father caught up with him and carried him home.

More and more rarely did Sanka's clear, firm answers gladden the teachers; and the latter could not make out what had happened to the boy.

Sanka's first bad mark, it is true, made him smart with shame.

"It is a sad thing, Konshakov! Sit down. Sad indeed!" said Nadezhda Petrovna with a sigh. "But wait. We will find the 'original cause' of it."

Crumbing the chalk and sniffing, Sanka suddenly hit upon what he thought was the "original cause." He told the teacher his mother was in the fields all day and he had to look after the house and dig the garden.

"That's right," the other children supported him. "He has a lot to do, a lot of mouths to feed; and he has to make baskets too."

CHAPTER 14.

A HOUSE WITHOUT A MASTER

After school Sanka went out to his mother in the fields.

The soil had been combed clean by the teeth of the harrow, and sowing was in progress.

On the edge of Staraya Pustosh, where Katerina's field was, Sanka noticed Grandad Vekshin. A seed basket was hanging on his chest like a huge ripe pumpkin.

Dressed in a white homespun shirt and wearing no hat, the old man was striding solemnly across the field, and with every regular sweep of his right hand the seed glittered in the sun and fell like heavy golden rain upon the soil. Masha, Fedya and Styopa were standing on the footpath watching the sowing.

Grandad reached the end of the field, tapped on the empty basket and shouted: "No more seed! Hurry up there!"

Masha and Fedya were the first to run out on to the road. A cart loaded with sacks was coming up the gradual slope. Katerina and Lena Odintsova were behind, pushing it.

Suddenly a lead-rope snapped and the cart came to a standstill. Katerina unharnessed the horse and knotted the ends of the rope. But

putting the horse back into harness was not so simple. It was not the quiet, easy-going Muromets she had to do with this time, but the stupid, mischievous mare Liska. Liska fell to munching the young roadside grass as if she had been starved for a week, and absolutely refused to be put back in the shafts.

Getting angry, Katerina threatened the mare with the reins. Liska answered with a kick, then shied and bolted over the field.

Sanka dashed to cut her off. The mare stopped an instant, cast a sly glance at the boy, as much as to say: "Try to catch me now!" and turned sharply in the opposite direction.

The children gathered round Katerina.

Grandad Vekshin came up, too, with his empty basket. He was dumbfounded at the sight of Liska running loose with her collar on, and shook his head in annoyance.

"It's all right, Zakhar Mitrich, we'll carry it, it's not far," said Katerina, flustered, and paying no attention to anyone, made to hoist a sack on her back.

"You've gone out of your mind," Grandad shouted at her. "There's six poods in that sack."

"You mustn't, Auntie Katya," said Masha running up to her. Looking around she saw two long poles. Could they use them?

Sanka did not know where to hide his shame. The collective-farm women and the brigade leader would be coming and making fun of his mother: "Fancy letting a horse loose with its collar on! Whoever heard of such a thing?"

There was nothing else to do but to catch Liska before it was too late.

He dashed into the field. Liska, however, was wily and spiteful. She would pretend to concentrate on the grass, but Sanka no sooner stretched out his hand to the bridle than she sprang aside and dashed away.

It took Sanka forty minutes before he cornered her on the bank of the river.

He thrust the bit into the mare's mouth, jumped on her back and set off at a gallop. Liska lashed out desperately with her hind legs, but Sanka was sitting fast. Then Liska resorted to her favourite trick: she

galloped forward, then came to a sudden halt, dropped to the ground and started rolling on her back. But Sanka knew what he was up against, and jumped aside in time. Kicking her legs in the air and rolling the grass flat, the mare rose; but Sanka again jumped on her back.

Realizing at last that she could not get the better of the boy, Liska gave in. Sanka rode her to the cart, harnessed her and drove the sacks to the field.

At dusk, as Sanka passed the Devyatkin's cottage on his way home, Petka ran out to meet him. He stamped the ground with a stout pair of light-brown, almost new, shoes as though he were going to start dancing, and then lifted his foot and showed the thick soles.

"Look at my new shoes, Konshak. Waterproof and don't wear out."

Sanka felt the leather and then looked down at his own battered top-boots—they would hardly last till the summer.

"That's the kind to have. Where can you get them?"

"Don't you know?" Petka winked. "I've got a Mum. When I need anything she digs it up out of the ground, she's a kind of conjuror." He laughed and added as an afterthought: "Don't get ideas. . . . I got them on the level. Uncle Yakov, my mother's brother, sent them from town. He's chief foreman in a shoemakers' artel."

Yevdokia looked out of the window and called Petka in for supper.

"Ah, my little nephew," she said, noticing Sanka. "Come in. You've not been to see us for ages."

Sanka reluctantly went in.

Yevdokia gave him a bowl of steaming cabbage soup and cut some bread.

"Sit down, boy, and have something to eat."

Sanka refused: "I'm not hungry, Auntie Yevdokia."

"You can tell us your tales afterwards, over your soup. I know your place, how merry and well-fed you are. Your stepmother is in the fields all day and you, poor orphans, can't even get a hot meal."

Despite Sanka's refusals, Yevdokia managed to make him sit down.

"What was that mishap your stepmother had?"

"Oh, it was nothing. . . ."

"Don't you try to shield her. Everybody knows just the same," Yevdokia said, shaking her head. "Turned the horse loose with its

collar on! A thing like that doesn't happen twice in a hundred years. 'You take it easy in the office, Katerina,' I told her. 'Don't make a laughing-stock of yourself.' But nothing would move her, she would go and work in those fields! She got the people together, but it's a regular Babel, not a brigade. They won't grow anything—neither corn, nor straw."

Sanka began to feel uncomfortable.

"It's a hard life you have with that mother of yours," Yevdokia went on. "The family's big, there's no real bread-winner..." She cast such a look of pity at Sanka that the boy wanted to get away from the cottage as soon as possible. "Yes, a house isn't a house without a master, as the saying goes. It's time for you to get a job, Sanka my boy. Study is all right but it doesn't fill your stomach. I'm thinking of taking my lad Petka to town to learn shoemaking. You go with him. You'll never be out of a job. Both your poor mother, before she died, and your father, when he went to the war, left me their instructions: Don't forsake our Sanka in time of need."

Yevdokia's voice broke with emotion, and she started sighing and sobbing over Sanka. He was a wretched little orphan, like a stranger in the house, and his stepmother had no heart for him. She recalled Sanka's mother. How devotedly she had looked after her children; how well they had got on; she would have gone through fire and water for them.

Sanka's awkwardness increased; he cast longing glances towards the door. Suddenly Yevdokia got out a needle and thread and started mending a hole he had at the elbow, saying: "Poor outcast, little waif!"

At last Sanka could put up with it no longer, and he clumsily left the table.

"I'll go now, Auntie Yevdokia."

"Go. Yes, little orphan, go. If you need anything, come to me, don't be shy. You know I love you like my own flesh and blood."

On arriving home Sanka sat for a long time in the porch, listening to the evening sounds outside—milk pattering in a pail, a dog yapping, an accordion playing.

"A house is no house without a master," Sanka recalled Yevdokia's words. The house had had a good master—his father. The collective-farm workers used to come to him for advice, to ask him when to

mow the hay or reap the corn. But who would come to the Konshakovs now?

Katerina returned from work.

"Liska gave you a hard time of it, eh, Sanka?" she asked. "What an obstinate beast I've got today!"

"She's just an ordinary horse. Only you mustn't threaten her. You don't know how to handle horses," Sanka said with a sigh of reproach. "Anyhow you shouldn't have had anything to do with that Staraya Pustosh. You'll get neither grain nor straw out of it. Ask Tatyana Rodionovna and she'll put you back on book-keeping."

Katerina turned round and took a long look at her son's face, which showed up vaguely white in the gloom.

"Who's been putting ideas into your head? Are we weaklings? Cripples? Do people live now as they used to? They are breaking everything up and modelling it on new lines. 'Neither grain, nor straw!' Don't dare to say a thing like that to me again, Sanka. Don't make me angry."

Sanka went inside, got undressed and lay down on his hard trestle-bed. By force of habit he put his tunic under his pillow. The letter crunched in his pocket.

The distant stars shone coldly through the half-thatched lean-to roof. Somewhere lost among them was the small dim Stozhari constellation. Looking at the stars Sanka engaged in a silent argument with his mother.

She puts on a brave face, he thought, she believes in her strength. But what will become of her when she finds out about the letter I am carrying in my pocket? And of course she will find out, she must. Who will help Mother then? What will happen to the family?

Yes, it was time for him to look after the household, to go out in the fields.

But perhaps it would indeed be better for him to find a place in town, as a shoemaker, as Yevdokia has said? It was a trade, anyhow; it would support the family. But who would keep an eye on the house?

In the end he fell asleep without making up his mind. All night long he dreamt about the poplar, which, for some reason, was drooping and shedding its leaves, although autumn was still a long way off.

CHAPTER 15
GOOD-BYE, SCHOOL!

Nadezhda Petrovna opened the class register and sat down.

"I must say," she began in a deliberate tone, "the class has grieved me this time. Devyatkin failed in three subjects at the examinations and will be kept down for a second year." The schoolmistress cast a glance over the hushed children. "But where is Devyatkin?"

"He is taking the milk out with his mother. It's all the same, he says, he is giving up school," said Syomushkin.

The teacher shook her head and went on:

"Secondly—Sanka Konshakov."

"Are you keeping him back for another year too?" It was Masha who spoke.

Many heads turned towards Sanka. He got up and stood at his desk, not moving a muscle.

"What's gone wrong, Sanka?" the teacher inquired. "All these years you have been studying as well as everybody else. And suddenly you have become a different boy altogether. I was positively ashamed of your written examination in mathematics. Look at Fedya Cherkashin; he joined us almost at the end of the term, yet he has managed to pass three examinations. He has promised to be ready for the others by the autumn. Really, Sanka, what has come over you?"

The children expected Sanka to say something, perhaps find some excuse, but he just picked his hard calloused hand and did not utter a word.

"It's a sad thing, Konshakov," sighed Nadezhda Petrovna. "You will have to take your examination in mathematics again in autumn. Sit down."

Sanka resumed his seat.

Nadezhda Petrovna called out more children's names, congratulating them on their being promoted to the seventh class. Then she wished them all a pleasant summer, closed the register and stood up. The children were free to go home, but none of them rushed to the

door as they usually did. They formed a tight ring around Nadezhda Petrovna. Every pupil had a question for the teacher, something about which they wanted to ask her advice on that last day.

Only Sanka, carefully opening the door a little, slipped out of the class-room into the cool, dark passage.

Through the kitchen with the familiar flowered wall-paper, where in winter he had so often warmed his hands, stiff with cold after playing snowballs, or roasted potatoes in the hot ash, he made his way out to the small quiet school yard.

It was noon on a hot June day. The hens, drowsy with the heat, were sprawling in the dust. The drain-pipe gave off dry parching heat. The iron bucket and the smooth-worn chain on the windlass of the school well gleamed dazzlingly bright. Even the watchwoman's goat, Berendei, a hater of little boys, had forgotten its fighting ardour and was skulking in some shady bushes.

Regardless of the heat, Sanka slowly wended his way round the school, a prey to wretched thoughts.

Something prickly scratched his hand. He looked round. It was a gooseberry bush—luxuriant and laden with small berries which were still green. Near it were red-currant and raspberry canes. Sanka had planted them himself the year Andrei Ivanich had been called up to the army. How they had grown! A smell of dry birch wood came from the little wood-shed. How grand it had been to hide in the nooks between the logs when he and the other boys played scouts or robbers. . . . There was the casement window near which Sanka's desk stood.

Sanka could not help wondering why he had such a sharp eye for everything that day, and why every little corner of the school was so dear to him.

He went farther on into the garden where a birch-tree, old but still vigorous, waved its small shimmering leaves over a round muddy pond.

It was the famous school birch-tree, and all the children loved it. Its bark, chalky white, flecked with black, was checkered from the roots to the lower thick boughs with names, dates and inscriptions.

It had become the custom for everyone leaving school to make some mark on the "farewell tree."

"Our school is the best of all," Sanka read; "Thank you, Andrei Ivanich. May you live a hundred years!" "However you look at it, N. P. is a pedantic old bore."

Sanka stood for a long time by the birch and then suddenly realized that he too was bidding farewell to school. He would no longer have to wake up when it was hardly light on blue winter mornings and buckle on his skis to race over the frozen snow from Stozhari to school.

His friends would no longer want him to recite poetry, full of fine, resounding words, at school parties; no more would he need to put on his father's raincoat in autumn so as to carry to school, without wetting or crumpling it, a festive placard that had cost him three long evenings' hard work.

Sanka took his penknife out of his pocket, looked for a free place on the birch-tree and with a heavy heart carved out on the white bark: "Good-bye, School!" At the side, in small lettering, he put his initials and the date. Then he vaulted over the fence and strode off along the quiet deserted road to Stozhari.

Blue-grey waves rippled over the cornfields. The copses were full of the twitter of birds. The whistling of an oriole in the top of a fir-tree rang loud and clear like the music of a flute. With loud cries, flights of speckled thrushes took wing out of the thick bushes. The birches dangled their long catkins and the young shoots on the pines stood erect like green candles. Over the meadow blew little tufts of fluff from faded dandelions casting off in the wind their downy bonnets.

Sanka felt light-hearted and calm. He no longer wanted to think of school, or of the inevitable unpleasant talk with his mother. If only he could go on and on along that quiet road, listening to the singing of the birds, watching the shadows of the clouds creeping over the earth.

But Sanka was not favoured to be alone. Hardly had he gone half a mile when he noticed Masha Rakitina. She was cutting across his path. Her shoes, tied together with a piece of string, were dangling over her shoulder. She had strapped her books together as the boys



did and was twirling them round at the end of the strap, as though about to fling them far away in the grass. And she was singing. What her song was about it was difficult to say. Perhaps she was singing because she did not need to go to school any more, because summer

was ahead, with bathing, berrying, mushrooming and other joys; or perhaps just because it was pleasant to go barefooted in the grass, to see the fields and meadows, to hear the buzzing of the bees.

With wrinkled brow Sanka crouched down behind a bush; he did not want to see anybody just then.

"Sanka!" Masha shouted out. "What are you hiding in the bushes for? Come out. I can see where you are."

She caught him up and strode along beside him.

"I knew you wouldn't go by the main road."

"Did you..."

"And when you had left the class-room, and as you went through the garden, I could see you all the time." She looked sideways at him and added in an undertone: "And I also saw you when you were carving on the birch-tree."

"Carving what?"

"You ought to know." Masha suddenly ran on ahead and barred his path. "What d'you mean, Sanka? Were you in earnest about saying good-bye to school?"

Sanka tried to get past the girl, first on the right, then on the left, but she stretched out her arms and kept him back.

"No, you tell me, honestly; and look me in the eyes. I'll find it all out myself."

"All right, I was in earnest," Sanka admitted sullenly, without looking at her. "What about it? I said good-bye and that's the end of it. A fine pupil I made, with my bad marks..."

"Oh, you silly good-for-nothing boy!" She clasped her hands in dismay. "And whose fault is it? You brought it on yourself. You hitched up with Devyatkin and turned your nose up at your real friends..."

And a lot of other things, harsh but perhaps deserved, Masha dealt off her sharp, straightforward tongue.

Sanka did not attempt to argue. He just scratched the ground with the toe of his boot and said with an effort:

"It's all right for you to talk. You've got your mother and your grandmother, and your sisters are grown up. But who have I got?"

Ashamed of her outburst, Masha hung her head. Then timidly she touched the boy's hand.

"Sanka, you mustn't, really you mustn't. Don't think anything bad because your father doesn't write. And sitting your exams again in the autumn will not be so terrible either. We'll pull you through. I'll help you, and so will Alyosha. We'll work the whole summer."

"I've had enough!" said Sanka with a sweep of the hand. "I know all I need to know. I can plough and reap. They'll accept me for any job on the farm even with bad marks. Plodding along the road of learning is all right for you."

Masha cast a sad look at the boy. . . . If his father or Andrei Ivanich had heard him say such things! What hopes they had had in him, how they had believed in him.

For a long time they walked on in silence. But silence is hard to keep. Once they were out in the meadow, Sanka plucked a supple osier switch and started striking off the heads of flowers and whisks of tall grass. A sweep of the arm, a sharp well-aimed blow, a recovering stroke—Sanka had read somewhere that that was the way cavalrymen cut down the targets when training—and the heads of the flowers were strewn on the ground.

The silence weighed on Masha too. She turned her attention to the flowers, which were to be found in great numbers: round daisies with a golden button in the middle and dazzling white petals that seemed to be made out of china, crimson balls of clover, tender bluebells, yellow buttercups and white parasol-shaped caraway.

Eagerly and swiftly—as she did everything—Masha plucked a large armful of flowers and started to plait a wreath. She made one chain, then a second. The clover scented her with its honeyed fragrance. Bumble-bees buzzed loudly round her ears, as if they were angry with this barefooted girl for taking away from them so many honey-laden flowers.

"You greedy, greedy little bees!" Masha laughed. She liked to speak aloud to everything living on the earth, whether it was a bee, a plant, or a young calf. "Look how many you've got left! I've only picked a few." Tossing her short hair, she forgot about her wreath,

popped a scarlet head of clover into her mouth, and started sucking out the sweet juice.

Masha had a sweet tooth, and in fields, meadows, or woods she always managed to find something eatable and tasty. As soon as the meadows started to bloom she would run with the other girls to look for sorrel. Then other plants would shoot up, acid ones that made your tongue tingle, sweet ones with thick white milky juice. Bird-cherries and wild strawberries, black currants, raspberries and sweet-briar would ripen in the woods. The whole summer Masha would be nibbling, chewing, or munching something. Her tongue would become rough and chappy and tinged with different colours.

"Must you chew every bit of grass you see!" her mother would say angrily. "It's not good for you, and you can't try them all."

... Masha looked round. Sanka was despatching a prickly thistle in the cavalry fashion. Swing, strike, withdraw. The switch swished like a sabre. But the thistle was a sturdy one, it only shuddered from the blows and ironically bowed to Sanka its head of large crimson flowers. Supple as it was, the switch gave in and snapped.

"Oh, you won't do for the cavalry, Sanka. You're no good," said Masha laughing.

Sanka flushed crimson and threw away the broken switch. Masha held out to him a small bunch of clover:

"Try it. It tastes so nice. Just like tea with honey in."

Sanka thrust his hands in his pockets. He was no lover of such sweetmeats.

"And here's a snack to go with the tea," Masha said, plucking a hollow stalk, peeling off the skin and crunching it with her teeth like a carrot.

"You'll be eating all the grass," Sanka said with a grin, and took a piece of clover from Masha. He sucked one head and then another. And, to tell the truth, it did not taste so bad.

Enjoying the wild flavours, boy and girl walked across the meadow down the river, crossed the wooden foot-bridge, which bent and splashed in the water under them, and went to the top of the hillock.

A crooked, thick-set oak sighed in the wind. Masha looked at Sanka with a merry gleam in her eye. She ran to the tree and clambered up it as quickly as if she were climbing a ladder.

"Sanka, come up here."

Sanka looked round. There was no one about. Needing no second bidding, he climbed up even higher than the girl.

The thin branches bent under Sanka and seemed about to snap. Masha looked up at him in alarm.

Far away, below the children, spread the green fields, the copses, the winding ribbon of the river, the roads and white foot-paths.

"Whose are those horses grazing there?" asked Sanka, looking attentively to one side. "Are they ours or not?"

"What a lovely view up here!" Masha exclaimed. "Look, there's the school. And the three windows by the porch are our class-room. Next year, you know, the seventh class will be on the ground floor." A sudden recollection made her falter as she looked at the boy—"Sanka... what are you going to tell your mother about school?"

"I'll tell her something." His brows knit, he climbed down.

The neighing of horses reached them. A few youngsters were driving a herd of horses across the meadow towards the river.

"They're ours!" And with a wave to Masha, Sanka dashed down the steep slope to the drove.

CHAPTER 16

WHEN SILENCE IS NOT GOLDEN

The spring work eased off, and Katerina made up her mind to devote a whole Sunday to her home and children. "I never see them... they are like orphans," she thought.

She washed the floor, baked pies, put a fresh cloth on the table and called the children to breakfast.

Noticing Masha and Fedya passing the window, she invited them in:

"We've got room for you too. Come in and keep us company."

Masha did not need to be asked twice, but Fedya, meeting Sanka's glance, remained rooted in the doorway. "Grandfather's waiting for me," he said. "I must go home."

"So you don't like pies?" Katerina laughed, and taking the boy by the hand, placed him next to Sanka at the table.

Sanka moved away as though Fedya had been a burning stove and sat stiff and taciturn all through breakfast. Fenya even said he looked as if he had swallowed a poker.

After breakfast the mother suggested writing a letter to their father.

Although they had received no answer for a long time, Katerina did not break the established custom and the whole family wrote to Yegor quite often.

"Whose turn is it, children?" Katerina asked.

"Mine!" Fenya hurried to sit in the place of honour, taking out ink and paper. "Sanka has written twice out of turn as it is."

Sanka did not argue. He suddenly left the table and reached for his cap.

"Are you going out?" his mother asked in surprise. "What about the letter?"

Sanka changed his mind. "No, I'm not. It's these flies . . . they're such a nuisance." And throwing open the window he started lashing out at the flies as desperately as if they had been a swarm of angry bees.

Katerina started dictating the letter to Fenya. She told about what was going on in her brigade and on the farm, mentioning how fast and well the wheat was growing on Staraya Pustosh.

Petka Devyatkin poked his head in the door and asked Sanka to come out—he had something urgent he wanted to talk to him about.

"Wait!" Masha hissed at him. "Can't you see they're writing a letter?"

Petka squatted on the doorstep.

"Well, Fenya, have you written everything?" Katerina looked over the letter. "Come along, children, it's your turn now. Tell Daddy how you finished the school year. Make him glad!"

Nikitka's success was reported first, for which purpose he was called in from the street and forced to scribble in his own hand:

"Daddy, I have passed the first class and gone up to the second class. Beat the nazis quickly and come home to us, your son Nikitka."

Then Fenya wrote about herself. She did not write much, for she was a modest girl, always afraid of over-praising herself.

"That's not all," Masha protested, you were put up to the fifth class with a certificate of honour. The teacher was full of praise for you. Why don't you say so?"

"Yes, write that, dear," her mother said.

Blushing, Fenya added the bit about the certificate of honour.

Sanka's turn came.

"You tell your father about yourself, too," Katerina said to him.

Sanka was vigorously rubbing the red enamel star on his forage cap.

"Why don't you speak up? You know how your father likes to hear about your success."

"What success?" Sanka replied with an effort. "I've been put up and that's all about it."

Noticing Masha and Fedya exchanging glances he burst out:

"What are you staring at me like that for? I'm not a picture. I said I've been put up, so write that. Without honours, of course!"

Fenya reached towards the ink-bottle. Masha unexpectedly took the pen out of her hand, laid it aside and turned to Sanka.

"But that's not true, Sanka. Why are you deceiving your father?"

"Deceiving Father!" Katerina lingered on the words in surprise. "So you've not been put up? You've been kept down?"

"It wouldn't matter about him not going up," Masha hastily put in. "He can sit his exams again. They told him so. We would all help too. Summer's long. I said to him: 'Don't you dare, Sanka, don't dare!' But he won't listen to anything."

"Don't dare what? What do you mean? Talk sense, can't you?" Katerina said, raising her voice.

"Oh, Auntie Katya. I just can't get it out. Let him tell you himself," the girl entreated.

Sanka had brushed all the fluff off his cap long ago, and the star on it shone fresh and new. But still he rubbed it on his sleeve.

"Look at me, Sanka," Katerina said quietly. "I didn't think you were such a rabbit."

Sanka rose from the bench with a jerk and stepped towards Masha. His face was pale, his lips were quivering. He felt like shouting out that this was all a waste of time. But he could not shout.

"You tell them about it. Tell them everything." He threw the words in the girl's face and rushed out.

Devyatkin ran out after him.

"A real little wolf, springs at everybody," Katerina said, shaking her head, and she asked Masha why Sanka had been expelled from school.

The girl stood silent with downcast head.

"He wasn't expelled, he left of his own accord," Fedya answered for Masha, and he told of the last day at school.

"Left of his own accord!" Katerina rose, aghast. "Just wait a moment. I'll give him a talking to."

She hurried out, but though she looked in the alley, in the garden and in the street, Sanka was nowhere to be found.

Masha and Fedya set off for the experimental plot. As they were passing the old barn, Devyatkin looked out and shouted in a shrill voice:

"Gossip! Sneak!"

Fedya winced, then turned round and rushed resolutely into the half-darkness of the barn.

"Just shout that again!"

"I will too, she deserves it," Devyatkin said with a sneer, but for safety's sake he moved closer to Sanka, who was lying face downwards in the straw.

"Leave him alone, Fedya," said Masha, coming into the barn.

But then, no longer able to restrain herself under the smart of the insult, she ran up to Devyatkin.

"A gossip, a sneak, am I? When we were looking for mushrooms and you and Sanka left me in the woods to scare me, did I complain to anyone? And when that old pistol of yours went off and nearly blinded Sanka. . . . And when you and he burnt a straw stack in the field. . . . Did I tell anyone then?"

"Quite right," Petka assented, "we'd never have had anything to do with you if you had. But why tell tales now?"

"Oh, aren't you clever! It's different this time. It's school . . . it's a matter . . . a matter. . . ." Unable to find the word she wanted, Masha prodded Petka in the chest. "Call me a sneak a hundred times if you like, but I won't keep a thing like that dark."

"Let herself go that time," Petka said with a sigh of relief, when Masha and Fedya had left. "Brought a bodyguard with her too. We know that kind."

He then sat down beside Sanka. "Sorry about school? Fancy being sorry about that! You're a dunce like me now anyhow. Pack your things and let's go to town. Uncle Yakov will fix us up there in no time. You don't know how much they earn, those cobblers. One bang with the hammer and it's a rouble; if you have to use the awl, it's ten. Why old chap, a street cobbler's is the best-qualified job of the lot these days."

Sanka was gazing pensively at the bird-cherry tree whose falling blossoms were scattering the earth below like lime.

"My mother," Petka mumbled on, "says that when we've mowed enough hay for the cow there'll be nothing else for me to do on the collective farm."

"Go away, Devyatkin," said Sanka in a muffled tone.

"What?"

"Go away, I tell you."

CHAPTER 17

STABLE-BOY

They were up to their ears in work on the experimental plot. The crops required weeding and fertilizing, the soil on the beds had frequently to be loosened.

Grandad Vekshin gave each of the children a job every morning, and in the evening he was strict in checking the work done. Then they would all assemble near the hut. Masha would get out her blue exercise-book and Grandad would make his "review of the day."

"Praiseworthy, quite persevering," he generally said of Styopa So-by-So. "He didn't let up for a moment or bother about the sun. We'll put that down, Masha."

Syomushkin's turn would come.

"Our Alyosha is the same as ever. Always in such a hurry he makes everyone laugh. He leaves three weeds for every two he pulls out. He wastes too much time chasing dragon-flies."

Masha could hardly manage to take down the old man's words.

"What are you sniggering at?" the old man would ask, noticing the children's smiles. "The order I got from Tatyana Rodionovna was to give each of you a complete testimonial—how you love work and how you respect the earth."

Then the old man would tell them exactly how much each of them had earned, even carrying his calculations to two places of decimals.

But Masha entered more than the children's testimonials and earnings in her blue exercise-book. According to an old habit in which she had been trained by Andrei Ivanich, she jotted down her own observations about plant life: dates of sowing, when the shoots appeared, when they started to bloom.

Grandad grudged no one his advice and the youngsters often learned something new from him: how to destroy weeds at the root, how to feed up wheat, how to pinch tomatoes. And all the time the blue exercise-book kept appearing in Masha's hands.

"What's that you scribble there every day?" the old man unexpectedly asked her one day.

"It's a diary, Grandad. We write down your advice."

"O-oh!" He smiled with gratification and after that he expounded his advice in greater detail and with more illustrations. But if he noticed that no use was being made of his counsels he would get really angry.

One day he stopped by Syomushkin, who was weeding a bed that had just been sown. So as not to have to bend too low, Alyosha was pulling the weeds out by the tops. Some of them came up easily, but others broke off, leaving the roots in the ground.

"You're getting on fine with the tops, but what about the roots?" the old man shouted at him. Stooping down, he cut deep

under a tap-root with his narrow iron hoe and pulled it out into the light

"What can you see?"

"D-dog's-grass, Grandad, a pernicious weed."

"So you know it, but spare it all the same. If it's pernicious it must be torn up root and all. What good is your work to anybody? Picking and poking is labour in vain. Worms dig in the earth too. But you should put sense into your work. What are you supposed to be? You're a future collective farmer, a master of the earth, of all nature, as you

might say. You must be able to dictate your will to every plant that grows."

The children caused Grandad a good deal of bother.

Besides what Grandad Vekshin liked to call the "planned" vegetables and grain, the children grew several sorts of tomatoes, pumpkins, early strawberries and a number of plants from southern climes as yet unknown in Stozhari: Amur soya, kok-saghyz, castor-oil plants, Daghestan hemp and peanuts.

At first Grandad was sceptical. Those delicate southerners, he thought, won't get used to our climate.

But the children succeeded in protecting the



shoots against the night frost, and the southern guests made themselves quite at home on the plot. The old man began to take a noticeable interest in them, and he would often shout at the children:

"Why are you forgetting your guests? Now you've invited them here, you might as well look after them properly."

It was hot, close weather and a hard crust was forming on the soil. The plants were crying out for moisture. The children watered without stinting. All day a thin stream of water trickled through the improvised water main, filling barrels, tubs and casks on the plot.

Water had to be fetched in pails from the river too. The tender-hearted Masha feared that all the plants would wither away unless they had moisture, and so she watered them all—vegetables, cereals and fruit seedlings.

One day, after a whispered talk with Zina, Masha fetched water from the river and started watering the wheat on bed number five.

Grandad Vekshin came along.

"Leave that alone! Do you hear?"

"Why, Grandad," the girl said in astonishment, "the poor wheat will dry up! It's already getting yellow and it looks so wretched."

"Water the vegetables and our guests from the South, but don't touch the fifth bed." And he took the watering-can away from her.

"But why, Grandad?"

"Why? Why?! Don't you know that's special wheat? It's selected. You mustn't pamper it. It must go through everything, both drought and cold. If it holds out, it means it is really vigorous. We shall not be ashamed to present that wheat to the collective farm as a gift from young and old."

"Is that like the sort that Yegor Platonovich grew? Is it, Grandad?"

"It may be——"

"Perhaps it will be better?"

"If it's as good, it will be all right."

"But will it be?" Masha insisted.

"Oh you busybody! Stop bothering me," the old man entreated. "You can't tell yet. Be patient, give it time."

He propped up a plywood board at the corner of the bed and wrote on it in big letters: "Watering Strictly Prohibited."

One day Lena Odintsova dropped in at the plot; she made a habit of visiting Grandad Vekshin regularly.

Lena went round looking at all that was sown there, peeping into every little nook.

"So you miss your old place, you deserter?" the old man said with a wink.

"It's fine here, Zakhar Mitrich," Lena admitted. "It's cool, you have running water; the berries are doing well. But in our fields it's scorching; not a shrub anywhere."

She asked whether he was pleased with the children. "They're a good help," he said, "but they are always getting new ideas."

"What ideas?"

Grandad wanted to tell her about the plants from the South, but suddenly he noticed in the corner of the plot a tin weathercock on a long pole, a rain-gauge and a kind of wooden box.

"Another venture," he said with a gesture of amazement.

"That's our meteorological station, Grandad," Masha declared bravely. "We shall be able to give weather forecasts."

"H'm," the old man said vaguely. "Well don't try to compete with me. When my legs start tingling with rheumatism, I can tell you at once that we'll have rain. It's infallible."

"But their legs don't tingle," Lena laughed.

Then Lena took Masha aside.

"Doesn't Sanka Konshakov work with you?" she asked.

"Our job doesn't interest him," Masha replied. "He says we're fussing over trifles."

"Doesn't interest him?" Lena exclaimed. "But if you showed him the plot? Your wheat? It's such a wonderful sight, isn't it?"

Next day Masha went to the Konshakovs'. Fenyas was keeping house alone. She said that Sanka was working in the stables, got up at the peep of day and came home only to eat and to sleep.

"And how does he get on with his mother?"

"No good at all," Fenyas complained. "Mum says: 'You shall go to school.' He says: 'No I won't, I'm going to earn my own living.' Then he slams the door and goes to the stable. And all the tears it's causing Mum. He's awfully obstinate, is our Sanka."

"Yes, he is," Masha agreed. Then, glancing out of the window, she saw Sanka. "Look, there he comes, your stable-boy."

"Ooh!" said Fenya in alarm. "And I've not got the dinner ready yet."

Sanka was accompanied by Nikitka, who was gazing adoringly at his brother, pleading to be taken out to watch the horses at night.

"We'll see," Sanka answered, and squatting on the porch step, he started taking off his boots.

Nikitka fetched a pail of cold water and spent a long time scooping water over his brother's arms, sunburnt shoulders and back.

"More, more! Don't be stingy!" shouted Sanka between puffs and snorts, and, as though by accident, he splashed his young brother until Nikitka howled with delight.

Having washed, Sanka went in, combed his wet hair in front of the mirror and sat down at the table.

"Good evening, comrade stable-boy!" Masha said laughing, as she came from behind the partition and placed some bread before Sanka. "How are you getting on?"

"Nothing gets rusty with us. We push ahead. What about you? Aren't your oranges and lemons ripe yet?"



"The wheat on our fifth bed is forming ears, Sanka," Masha informed him proudly. "Would you like to have a look at it?"

"What fifth bed?" Sanka asked, puzzled.

"Don't you remember what I told you—Grandad Vekshin found a special sort. We sowed it on bed number five."

"Is it a big bed?"

"Not very. Five paces wide, eight long."

"Ooh! What a size!" Sanka guffawed. "I thought you had sown at least a couple of acres..."

"There wasn't enough grain. But you should see how it is growing," said Masha, screwing up her eyes. "Grandad says it's a rare and valuable sort. The wheat in the fields is only making stems, but ours already has ears."

However valuable the wheat might be, Sanka maintained that not in a hundred years would they grow wheat like his father's.

"But perhaps ours will be better?" Masha argued.

"Better?"

"Well, just as good, say," Masha stuck to her ground.

Sanka gave a condescending grin, but curiosity was already getting the better of him.

"All right, take me there. We'll have a look at your marvellous wheat," he said when he had finished his meal.

"You're improperly dressed, Comrade Captain," Masha said, noticing that he was about to go without his forage cap. "They all say you don't even go to bed without your cap."

Sanka looked on the bench, peered under the bed, but nowhere was the cap to be seen.

"I'll do without it," he said with a wave of his hand.

CHAPTER 18

ABOUT TURN

Masha and Sanka went along the back of the gardens and stopped at "Vekshin's outfit." The girl looked round and drew Sanka towards the fence. Dark green nettles rose up like a wall before them. Masha pulled down the sleeve of her jacket and moved the nettles

aside. Then with a push of her shoulder she opened a skilfully concealed gate. Immediately, somewhere in the middle of the plot there was a ringing and jingling.

"That's our signal system," Masha whispered. "The first line. Then there's a second and a third."

"Signal system? Who thought that out?" said Sanka, scarcely able to contain his impatience to see inside the plot.

Suddenly there was a rustling in the bushes. Masha seized Sanka's hand and made him crouch down by the fence among the tall nettles and burdock.

Alyosha Syomushkin appeared from behind a bush in a broad-rimmed straw hat.

"I thought it was Grandad Vekshin. He doesn't like strangers coming here," Masha whispered, and rising out of the burdock, she and Sanka went up to Syomushkin. "Alyosha, so you're on duty today?"

"Yes, I am." Syomushkin barred their path, looking at Sanka as though he had never seen him in his life.

"What are you staring at?" asked Sanka in surprise. "Don't you recognize me?"

"I recognize you all right. You're well known here."

"We'll let me past, if I'm well known."

"In a month of Sundays, when the cows come home, when the pigs fly," Alyosha rattled out with a comical movement of the tip of his pointed nose.

"Anyone would think it was a military objective here," Sanka put his hands behind his back and advanced towards the spare-framed Alyosha.

But the latter did not bat an eyelid. Putting two fingers in his mouth he gave a long whistle.

Styopa and Fedya Cherkashin emerged out of the bushes.

"Really, boys, how awful you are," Masha said running to them. "Let's take Sanka in to show him our crops..." She stopped short as she saw Fedya looking at her as though she had been at fault.

Then he went leisurely up to Sanka.

"Where's your cap?"

"Yes, where is it?" echoed Styopa.

Sanka looked in amazement at the boys and passing his hand over his bare head asked:

"What's it got to do with you?"

"Well, we'd like to know..." Syomushkin answered, smiling scornfully. "Perhaps you've lost it somewhere. But for the time being—about turn. When we need you we'll send for you. We'll be only too glad to see you. But at the moment we're getting on pretty well without your company."

"Yes, we can do without you," Styopa supported him, and cast a significant glance in the direction of the gate.

Sanka felt his blood rising. He was not the kind to go away with nothing for his pains. In Loklevo, five boys had once refused to let him pass them in the street. But he had passed them. Why not to do the same again? Besides, he was in a far better position this time. That sissy Fedya did not count, Alyosha would show pluck until the first blow, the only one who would put up a fight would be Styopa So-by-So. Well, here goes!

Sanka stuck out his left shoulder and took the first step forward. But Masha spoilt it all. She wedged herself in between the boys and shouted at the top of her voice:

"What are you doing, you're crazy. I'll raise the alarm and call Grandad." She pushed the boys aside and took Sanka by the hand. "Never mind them. Come on. I'll show you what I promised."

"There's no need to show me anything," Sanka wrenched his hand free and rushed to the gate. "I know what games you're playing here. You're just a lot of kids. And if you think you're helping the collective farm, you're wrong." He gave the gate a powerful kick. It did not yield. He kicked harder.

"Got to know how," Syomushkin said, running up. He performed some mysterious motion and threw the gate wide open. "That's better, isn't it? Well, I wish you luck. Mind you don't trip up, Sanka, keep to the left, take care of yourself while you're young..." Suddenly he squatted down by the fence and burst out laughing. "I thought so! Oh, help! I'm dying! Look at him sprawling in the ditch, right in the nettles!"

Lena appeared from behind the bushes.

"What's that you're laughing at?"

Masha, bursting with anger, ran to Lena.

"They ought to be ashamed of themselves!" she said pointing to Fedya, Styopa and Alyosha. "I brought Sanka here and they drove him away, made fun of him . . . they nearly had a fight. And you call yourself Pioneers! Is that the way to behave?" she said, turning on the boys.

"And is that?" Fedya looked seriously at her and nodded to Styopa.

Styopa rummaged in his trouser pockets, known by all the children not as pockets but as "the workshops," because you could always find a dozen nails, a coil of wire and a decent piece of string in them. This time, however, he pulled out of the depths of his pocket a green cloth forage cap with a red enamel star on it, and showed it to Masha.

"Do you recognize whose it is?" Fedya asked.

"Yes, Sanka's."

"D'you know where we found it?"

"Where?"

"By your bed of Victoria strawberries!" Syomushkin suddenly shouted in a breaking voice. "That's where!"

"Oh!" the girl exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She ran across the whole plot and stopped near the strawberry bed.

The strawberries were "extra." Masha and Zina had planted them to have some delicacy for the summer.

Bare footprints could be seen on the bed, here and there clusters were trampled into the ground, and berries which were just turning pink had been crushed.

Masha sighed with relief, looking at the boys who had come up with Lena. "You did give me a fright! I thought they had all been stolen!"

"You can thank Grandad. He was the one who scared Sanka. . . ." And Syomushkin told how that morning, at the break of day, Grandad Vekshin had almost caught Sanka Konshakov and Petka Devyatkin on the plot.

"Here's Grandad," Styopa whispered. "Now we'll catch it!"

Leaning heavily on his stick, Grandad Vekshin came up to the hut, let himself down on the bench and rubbed his knee.

"Not feeling well, Zakhar Mitrich?" Lena asked. "You should lie down."

"How can a man lie down with watchmen like them!" the old man nodded disapprovingly at the boys.

"I was only just a tiny bit late on watch, Grandad," Syomushkin admitted guiltily.

"And because of that tiny bit our 'Golden Rain' oats got trampled and our strawberries were nearly stolen. But it's not you so much," the old man went on with a wave of his hand. He turned to Lena, "What urchins we have here in Stozharil! As soon as it's summer, it starts. Give somebody a sprig of your best berries or a delicious apple—oh no, it won't suit him. But he'll go and grab sour, green things and love them! It's past my understanding. What do they teach them at school?" The old man scratched his head in silence. "If I catch that Konshakov I'll stuff his breeches with nettles, that I will. I'll make him dance, the young strawberry beetle!"

"That's the stuff!" chuckled Syomushkin, and then he whispered to Masha: "Note that in the diary—the first garden pest has appeared on our plot—Sanka, the strawberry beetle."

"I will not write anything of the sort!" Masha declared, turning away.

"That boy's turned into a bad lot since his father's been away." Vekshin cast a severe glance over the children. "It would be better for you not to chum up with him. It will do you no good."

"Grandad," said Masha quietly, "Sanka does not go stealing other people's strawberries. He's not that sort. . . ."

"What is this, then?" Grandad took the cap from Styopa and held it out to Masha. "Did the wind blow it here? Or did a magpie bring it on its tail?"

For a long time Masha considered the cap with the red star.

"Perhaps it wasn't Sanka? Perhaps somebody else dropped it!" she said with an effort.

"You're always shielding him!" Syomushkin turned on her. "Who does Sanka go with now? Devyatkin. And Devyatkin's always prowl-

ing around our plot, spying, looking for ways in and out. They didn't succeed today, but some other time that pair will get our berries. And you bow and scrape to him: 'Do us a favour, Sanka darling, please come and have a look.' And what shall we do with you?"

"Make her water her share twice today and twice tomorrow," Styopa suggested.

"Did you hear, Masha?" Syomushkin asked.

"I will too. It won't break my back." And the girl went gloomily for a watering-can. "But it wasn't Sanka all the same," she said, thinking aloud. "He's not that sort."

"It's good to believe in one's comrades," Lena said, coming up to her. "I don't think Sanka Konshakov had anything to do with it either. They have got it all wrong." And taking another watering-can she started watering the beds with Masha.

CHAPTER 19

THE CAP

Sanka, of course, had put no faith in Syomushkin's advice to keep to the left and take care of himself while he was young. He had kept to the right and fallen with a crash into a deep ditch overgrown with nettles. It had been like falling into a cauldron of boiling water.

Jumping out, Sanka dashed headlong for home. His face and hands were burning from the sting of the nettles and covered with big red blisters. His heart was full of direst feelings of revenge.

Fancy playing a trick like that on him! Promising to show him some wonderful kind of wheat, inviting him to the plot, and then throwing him out like that!

Turning over in his mind all the ways of getting his own back on his insulters, he reached home almost without noticing it.

Suddenly he remembered something. "Why did Fedya and Styopa ask about my cap?" With a sense of misgiving, Sanka started the search again. But nowhere was the cap to be found. Then he called Nikitka in from the street and submitted him to a strict interrogation. But Nikitka swore by all he could that he had not taken the cap.

"Last time I put it on, the wind blew it into a pool, and you gave me such a punch that I never even look at it now."

It was Fenyá who supplied the answer to the mystery.

"Petka took your cap. He came early when you were still asleep," she said.

Sanka ran to the Devyatkins'. As he rounded the corner, he noticed Petka coming from the well, carrying buckets of water on a yoke. He had a sulky look on his face.

The buckets were swinging from one side to the other reflecting the dancing sunlight, water was splashing out into the hot white dust, leaving dark stains in it.

Petka pretended to be so completely absorbed in his buckets as not to notice Sanka.

"Don't you recognize your neighbours?" said Sanka, grabbing the yoke.

"A-ah Konshak!" cried Petka with feigned surprise, putting down the buckets. "Just look what they're making me do now. Fetch water. Water the kitchen-garden. Do this. Do that. Rotten business! Hardly the thing for a chap like me, eh? What a bore it all is. . . . And, you know, I'd just got my fishing-rod ready and dug up worms."

Having got on to his favourite subject—fishing—Petka could not stop. It was just the time for chub to bite. The Black Pool was the place to go to, towards evening. Timka Kolechkin was going too. It would be better not to take him though—he would frighten all the fishes away.

"Never mind the chub," Sanka interrupted. "Where's my cap? Who said you could take it without asking?"

"But you said I could wear it yourself! The day before yesterday. Don't you remember?"

"And where is it now? Show me it."

"Keep your hair on, old chap. Your cap's safe and sound in our house," Petka said, growing flustered. "I'll get it in a jiffy." And forgetting all about his buckets, he ran into the house.

That fine cloth officer's forage cap, a gift from a wounded lieutenant in hospital to whom Sanka used to take presents from the collective-farm women, was the boy's pride. Almost new, with a

little enamelled red star, it was just his fit and he used to wear it exactly as laid down in army regulations—tilted forward over the right temple, about two finger-breadths above the eyebrow.

The other boys envied Sanka and often asked him to let them wear it. Sanka never refused.

Petka had repeatedly offered Sanka his nice new check cap, or his penknife and splendid plastic comb, in exchange for the forage cap. Sanka, however, was not tempted by such riches; all that Petka got was permission to wear the forage cap for a day or two.

Five minutes elapsed and Petka did not turn up. Sanka peeped in through the cottage window. There was nobody there.

"He's most likely run out the back-way. Where's he gone to?" Sanka wondered, scanning the street.

By the well, behind a high stack of barked tree trunks that looked like enormous wax candles, he heard children's voices.

He dashed round the trunks and saw Petka and Timka Kolehkin playing knuckle-bones.

Petka had just tossed a heavy lead-weighted knuckle-bone at the stake, and the knuckle-bones on it had flown in the air like a flight of scared sparrows and scattered on the ground. He was gathering them and putting them into his cap, which was already brimful of bones. Timka was enviously eying Petka's winnings.

"So that's it!" Sanka said, announcing his presence with a whistle. "Playing with Timka now!"

"He keeps on pestering me, you know, I couldn't get rid of him. Wanted me to have a game. Well, I'm showing him what I can do. Let him learn from Devyatkin while he can." Petka bent down to get the bones.

But Sanka forestalled him, snatched up the cap, shook the bones out at Timka's feet and confronted Devyatkin.

Petka prudently retreated a little. Sanka, his hands behind his back, strode after him. Petka hastened his step. Sanka did the same. Suddenly Petka made a dash for home. But he was no expert at sprinting and in a few leaps Sanka had cut him off and forced him to run on down the street.

There is no telling how the pursuit would have ended, had not Petka caught sight of Sanka's mother.

"Good afternoon, Auntie Katya!" he shouted, running towards her.

"Good afternoon, if you mean it. What's the hurry, is there a fire somewhere?"

"We're running a cross-country . . . for a bet. Sanka always puts such airs on, as though no one could beat him. Well, you can see for yourself who's first." Purple in the face, Petka stopped to get his breath.

The meeting with Katerina was lucky. Sanka would not, of course, lay a finger on him in her presence.

"What's the matter, Sanka, letting Petka come first?" Katerina asked.

"I'll give him first," Sanka muttered between clenched teeth.

"You see, it's always like that, Auntie Katya. When he loses, he gets in a temper." For safety's sake Petka kept as near as he could to Katerina and as far as he could from Sanka. He was delighted. Everybody knew that Konshak was a hot-tempered chap but quick to cool off; by evening he would have forgotten it all.

Timka came up to Sanka.

"What's up between you and Devyatkin?" he asked.

"He took my cap, he's not given it back yet."

"But he dropped it on Vekshin's plot!"

"Eh? How do you know?" Sanka stopped.

"We went there together," Timka in his simplicity admitted with a blush. "To pick strawberries. But they are still green and sour, they set your teeth on edge. And besides, we nearly bumped into Grandad Vekshin."

"Oh Timka, you innocent little lamb!" was all Sanka could say. But that was not the end of the forage-cap affair.

In the evening, after a hasty snack, Katerina went to a meeting of the farm management at which the haymaking was to be discussed. She instructed the children to have supper and a cup of tea by themselves.

Fenya put the samovar on and the young Konshakovs sat down to table.

Before Sanka had had time to drink his first cup, Masha Rakitina came in.

"Good evening," she said, "and a good appetite."

"You're welcome," Fenya answered like a grown-up. "Sit down and have tea with us."

"Thanks, I've just had mine."

But Fenya, like a hospitable hostess, brought a stool up to the table, flicked a duster over it and poured out a cup of tea.

Masha declined again out of politeness and then sat down at the corner of the table.

Sanka, taking no notice of her, sipped his tea noisily and squinted over his cup at the newspaper.

Holding her saucer on the tips of her outspread fingers, Masha blew her scalding tea.

"We are going to mow the hay soon" she informed Fenya in a boastful tone. "All of us, boys and girls. We'll have to get up quite early now, at the first crow of the cock. Tatyana Rodionovna herself invited us. 'You must come,' she said; 'we insist, we can't manage the hay without you.'"

"What did I tell you!" Sanka burst out, unable to restrain himself, although he had made up his mind not to speak to Masha. "This is no time for playing at trifles. There are more important things to do on the farm. But as for insisting—you imagined that."

Masha went on with her story, not even favouring Sanka with a glance.

"The haymaking is a big job for us," Tatyana Rodionovna said. "You are our chief assistants, we rely on you."

"Can I help too?" Fenya asked.

"I should think so, you're in the fourth class. We'll make you turn the hay."

"Who's we?" Sanka inquired.

"Our brigade, the Vekshin brigade."

"I should like to know," Sanka said with a sneer, "what you're going to do at the haymaking."

"Everybody knows that—dry the hay and mow..."

"Mow?! Since when have there been any mowers among you? Or do they spring up like mushrooms after a shower? Got many of them?"

"Not so many perhaps, but all the boys will mow."

"Fedyà Cherkashin too?"

"Of course!"

By rights Sanka should have whistled with surprise then, but the news was so unexpected that he swallowed his tea the wrong way and got a fit of coughing. Fenyà, terrified, rushed to him and drummed on his back.

Fedyà Cherkashin—mowing! Cleaning away ashes, digging skimpy little vegetable beds, there wasn't much in that. That didn't need much brains. But mowing! The whole collective farm knew that only a handful of the Stozhari boys had any skill at mowing. Sanka counted them up: himself, Styopa So-by-So, Petka Devyatkin—perhaps, and three or four more.

At last he got over his coughing.

"What's this? A game or something? Nikitka was choking at dinner, and now you," Fenyà said reproachfully. But, suddenly remembering she had not fed the calf, she ran out.

"Oh well, with mowers like Fedyà Cherkashin, Stozhari has nothing to be afraid of. We'll come out first in the whole district," Sanka remarked. He could not help a caustic smile, but he tried to speak seriously and courteously.

"Don't you be so cheeky!" Masha flared up. "You and Devyatkin have great opinions of yourselves. You've got yourself tied to him with a rope and I don't know where he's dragging you to."

"Who's dragging me?" Sanka rose from the table, pushing his chair back noisily. "What d'you mean by talking to me like a kid?"

"Why shouldn't I? What is that they're calling you now? A strawberry beetle!"

"A what?"

"Haven't you ever heard of them?" The girl thrust her hand under her jacket, pulled out Sanka's cap and threw it on the table. "You shameless thing!"

She leaped headlong out of the door and a minute later her wrathful little face was thrust in at the open window.

"Next time you go stealing strawberries leave your cap at home, in case you lose it again"

"Masha! Masha!" Sanka rushed to the window, but she was already gone.

He stood for a long time twiddling his cap in his hands. Then he made up his mind and went to Devyatkin's.

Devyatkin was sitting in the porch rasping a tune on an accordion. Seeing Sanka he hastily rose. "You know, I've searched high and low for your cap. It is as though the earth had swallowed it up. I'll look again tomorrow."

But to Petka's great surprise, Sanka took his cap out of his pocket, gave him a smarting smack on the nose with it and then started dragging him away.

"Let's go to the logs. I want to talk to you."

Feeling that the talk boded nothing good for him, Devyatkin decided to try cunning.

"Let me take my accordion off, anyhow."

Sanka let his arm go. Devyatkin rushed through the gate and bolted it after him.

CHAPTER 20

MOW, MOWER!

Next morning Sanka was awakened by the loud clear ring of steel hammers—scythes were being sharpened in Stozhari. The hammers echoed throughout the village as though announcing to the people that the best month of the summer, the time of the most joyful work of haymaking, had come.

Sanka took his father's scythe, wrapped up in a cloth, out of its plywood box.

It was fine and light and the boy remembered how his father, mowing with it in the meadow, used to outstrip all the others.

"It's not a scythe, it's a bird!" people used to say. "It just flies along."

Sanka unwrapped the scythe, wiped it with wet grass and, recovering from the dimness of time, the blade flashed in the sun like a silver sabre.

The boy fixed it on its shaft, a long wooden stick with a grip in the middle. Then he cut himself an elongated whetstone.

Then came the most difficult job of all: to hammer out the scythe on an anvil so that the blade became fine and sharp like a razor. He had to strike the edge of the blade carefully and evenly with the hammer.

But Sanka was out of practice and the hammer kept rebounding in his hand, making the blade uneven and jagged.

Besides that, Sanka twice hit his finger instead of the scythe and for a long time he danced round, writhing with pain and blowing on his injured finger.

"Ah, you mower, you meadow-shaver!" Katerina shook her head. "Aren't you rather young to start that job. You had better fix the rake and ted the hay."

"I'm just the age," Sanka replied, and when the pain relaxed he started hammering out the scythe again.

The long-awaited morn dawned at last.

Well before sunrise, somebody gonged on the iron girder near the farm office.

But children sleep like tops at dawn, and Katerina decided not to call Sanka so early—it would do no harm if he went to the haymaking a little later.

No doubt Sanka would have overslept the solemn hour of the departure for the meadow, had it not been for a crash and din overhead. He jumped up as if something had pricked him, sprung out of bed and spun round like a top. An empty pail was rolling with a clatter on the floor. His "alarm-clock" had worked to perfection. Sanka had "wound it up" the night before by placing an empty pail on a barrel in the passage where he slept, and tying to the handle of it a thin string, the other end of which he had passed out into the yard and fastened to the door of the cow-shed. Going to milk the cow in the morning, his mother opened the door, the string was pulled taut, and the pail tumbled with a clatter on the floor.

Dressing and pulling on his boots, Sanka ran out into the street. The lilac dawn, veined with pink, was still only half aglow over the fir-grove. White steam rose from the river as though boiling water had been poured into it. On the edge of the village, shepherds' horns, the cracking of whips, and the lowing of cattle could be heard.

Sanka was glad he had got up so early. Just imagine it! What greater shame could there be than to turn up at the meadow when work was already in full swing!

Shouldering his scythe, Sanka set out for the collective-farm office.

From every cottage collective-farm women, old men and children were wending their way there. Grandad Vekshin came with his brigade too.

"You should take it easy, Zakhar Mitrich," the chairwoman said to him.

"I can't, Rodionovna. It makes my hands itch. I must do just one strip."

They all went to the meadow, which was beyond the wood, in a loop of the river, about two miles from Stozhari.

It was cool and quiet there; the grass, drooping under the weight of the abundant dew, looked a smoky grey.

"We'll, good people of Stozhari, I wish you a plentiful hay harvest!" Grandad Vekshin spat in his hands and gave the first swinging stroke with his scythe. "Mow, mow, while dew does glow!"

He was followed by the best women mowers.

But the old man soon got tired; he stepped aside and took over the job of sharpening the women's scythes when they got blunted.

Tatyana Rodionovna placed the children apart from the grown-ups, along the riverside where the grass was soft and juicy.

Fedya was on the very edge of the field; behind him were Styopa So-by-So and Alyosha Syomushkin.

"They won't go far ahead," Sanka thought, taking his place behind Syomushkin.

Devyatkin came up. He had his strong waterproof shoes on: at his side hung a shining tin case out of which his whetstone peeped like a dagger out of its scabbard.

Noticing Sanka, he cast a cautious sidelong glance at him and decided it would perhaps be better to keep his distance. But, just on the off-chance, he tried to start a conversation.

"I've a capital whetstone, Konshak. It sharpens a scythe by itself. Want to try it?"

But Sanka pretended not to notice him.

He lowered his scythe to the grass, swung out his right arm, and the scythe described its first half-circle.

Devyatkin chuckled as he took up his place behind Sanka. "He'll get over it in a day or two."

Sanka was going ahead. Swishing lightly like a shuttle, thrusting to left and to right with a juicy crunching, the scythe sliced through the gay meadow-grass and laid it in a thick tufted ridge.

"It's a song, not work," Sanka's father used to say, and Sanka had admired the easy skill with which his father swung the scythe.

Now the boy endeavoured to copy his father in every detail. He held his scythe firmly, pressing it flat to the ground and taking just enough grass at each stroke, so that not a single stalk remained uncut.

And what a lot there was to see in the thick grass!

Now the scythe would cut through a small ant-hill and the white rice-like eggs would scatter over the mowed grass. Then a grey meadow partridge would flutter from under the blade with a pitiful cheep and scuttle away across the meadow. The red wild strawberries glistened like little drops of blood among the green stalks.

But it was hardly fitting for a real mower to give chase to partridges or stoop to pick strawberries. So Sanka mowed on without stopping. Warmth was flowing through his veins, his back and shoulders were tingling, the song of the scythe was getting merrier and louder.

But whose were those legs in front?

"Look out! I'll be nipping your heels!" shouted Sanka mischievously.

Alyosha Syomushkin shot a glance back, shook the drops of sweat from his nose and went on swinging his scythe still faster to get away from Sanka pressing on behind.

"Who are we going to tether to the tufts?" Sanka grinned, looking



at the stalks still standing where Alyosha had mowed. "That's not mowing. It's stroking the grass, just cutting off the tops."

Alyosha could find no retort, he started mowing more slowly and neatly. But Sanka's scythe swished closer and closer.

"You don't know the rules," Sanka reminded him. "If you can't keep up, step aside. Don't keep others back."

With a wry grin, Syomushkin surrendered his place to Sanka and stepped back behind the other mowers.

With a glance at Styopa and Fedya mowing in front of him, Sanka took off his tunic and tossed it at the feet of the girls tedding the mowed grass.

Well, here goes! Let Masha see her darling Fedya begging for mercy today. This isn't like playing on the common or poking about on vegetable beds.

"Look! He's taking his tunic off," Zina Kolesova nudged Masha. "Now we'll see something."

Devyatkin spat in his hands with a grunt of satisfaction.

"That's the stuff, Konshaki!" he shouted. "We'll run them off their legs. Hey, you Vekshin boys, watch your heels."

Fedya and Styopa looked back and took off their tunics too.

The young mowers got to the end of the field, mowed another length, and yet another, but the order was still the same: Fedya and Styopa in front, Sanka and Petka behind them.

Suddenly Styopa's scythe grated on a stone hidden in the grass. The blade was blunted and no matter how much Styopa scraped with his whetstone, the scythe would do nothing but lay the grass flat.

Meanwhile Sanka and Petka came up behind. Styopa went and took his place at the tail.

The enormous orange-coloured sun leisurely emerged from behind the wood, as if making up his mind that it was time at last for him to start his day's work too. And the meadow, which till then had been a smoky grey, flashed with millions of lights, as though sown with gems, and glowed with such bright and pure colours that the young mowers were lost in admiration. But not for long. In a minute they were again swinging their scythes.

Now there was only Fedya Cherkashin in front of Sanka and Devyatkin. He was mowing with a steady swing, his feet set solidly on the ground, his right shoulder forward.

"I'll catch him up all the same," Sanka thought fiercely.

But Devyatkin was getting exhausted.

"We won't catch him up, Konshak," he moaned. "Don't mow so wide."

Sanka looked round, wiped the sweat from his face, but made his strip no narrower.

Then Petka noticed that Fedya seldom sharpened his scythe, but was taking it more and more frequently to Grandad Vekshin.

"That's not fair!" he shouted. "We sharpen our own scythes, but you have a nurse to help you. And when Grandad Vekshin sharpens it, any scythe cuts like a razor."

Fedya did not answer, but after that he always sharpened his scythe himself.

"Now the sparks will fly," Devyatkin thought. He started looking more often at the sun, estimating how long it would be before the break for lunch. Then he would spend a long time examining the blade of his scythe, running his finger over it and shaking his head as much as to say: "I could do better, but my scythe has got blunt."

All of a sudden he cut open a wasp's nest concealed in the grass. "Wasps! Wasps!" he yelled, and covering his neck with his hands he bolted for the river.

Knowing that wasps were no joke, most of the young mowers followed him. But Sanka and Fedya went on mowing. They just looked at each other to see who would be the first to leave the job.

The wasps buzzed furiously round their heads.

Fedya suddenly bent down and strewed moist grass on his head. "That's a good dodge," thought Sanka, and could not help copying him.

The boys laid on stronger than ever. Their vests grew dark with sweat; but neither would give in.

The infuriated wasps soon calmed down; the children came out from their hiding-places in the bushes back to the mowing and watched the contest in great suspense.

Masha did not take her eyes off the mowers. She could not even say which of them mowed better. Sometimes the girl thought that Fedya was at the end of his strength, and wished Sanka's scythe would soon get blunt; but when Sanka started to lag behind, Masha felt rather sorry for him.

"Step on it, Konshak! Put a spurt on!" Devyatkin egged Sanka on. "Clutch in top speed!"

"What are you yelling for? Don't disturb them!" Masha said sharply.

Grandad Vekshin and Katerina came up from behind.

"That's it, you mowers, that's it, you meadow-shavers!" The old man smoothed his beard with an air of satisfaction. "Don't hurry, cut more regularly. Don't strain yourself, Fedya boy. Lay on the heel, the heel. And you, Sanka, don't be so greedy, don't take in so much and cut more neatly. . . . See, what our youngsters are growing into. Katerina Vasilievna," he said, turning to Katerina. "Our fighting reserves, reinforcements for us collective farmers."

"They are good workers, there's no denying it," Katerina sighed. "Mine has started feeling himself quite grown up, he's left school. I don't know what to do with him."

"It's a puzzle you've got there," said Grandad sympathetically. "But you be stricter with him, like a father."

"Yes, I'll have to," Katerina agreed, observing Fedya attentively.

His vest had been patched by an unskilled hand, his top boots were worn low.

"You must have a hard life of it, you and your grandson, Zakhar Mitrich. Like in the woods, with the partisans."

"What's hard about it?" the old man retorted with a gesture of vexation. "We live as we like."

"If Fedya would come and live with me . . . he needs a woman's care."

"You've got as many as you can cope with. And he and Sanka wouldn't get on together. They're a pair of fighting cocks. . . there'd be no end of bickering. . . " And Grandad hastily changed the subject.

Presently a break was called for lunch.

Sanka dried his scythe with grass, put it over his shoulder and, meeting Fedya's glance, shot at him: "Feed yourself well and see that your scythe is sharp. We'll have another bout!"

"That we will!" Fedya agreed.

CHAPTER 21

CARTING THE HAY

After lunch, however, there was no more mowing for the boys. They were sent to dry the hay and rake it together into stacks. But the most interesting of all was to be the next day's work—carting the hay in from the meadows to Stozhari where it was to be stacked in huge ricks near the stables.

As soon as he heard that, Sanka ran to see Tatyana Rodionovna.

"Do you need somebody to take charge of the cart-drivers?" he inquired.

"Yes, we do."

"Give me the job then. I work in the stables with Auntie Vasilisa. The horses do anything I tell them. I can manage it."

"All right, young Konshakov, do your best," Tatyana Rodionovna agreed, taking in the strong, well-built figure of the boy.

Next day, Sanka and his friends went to the stables. Fedya, Alyosha and Styopa were already there.

Sanka frowned: carting hay in from the meadows was no joking matter; he had chosen the most reliable and capable boys for the job.

"I've got enough hands," he said bluntly to Fedya.

"But Tatyana Rodionovna sent us. 'Go and join Konshakov,' she said."

"Well, to me she said: 'You'll be held responsible for the carts, pick out what assistants you want!'"

"So you picked them all from your own end of the village," Alyosha argued. "Are we any worse than them?"

"And what'll you do if a horse breaks lose in the field?" inquired Devyatkin.

"Harness it again, of course." Alyosha shrugged his shoulders. "That's not hard."

"What if a wheel comes off?"

"We'll lift the cart up by the splinter-bar and put it on again."

"Huh—by the splinter-bar! Will you be able to?" sneered Petka. Alyosha patted stocky Styopa So-by-So on the back.

"It's all right. We'll manage," said Styopa, smiling.

"And how will you get down to the bridge? You know how steep it is." Devyatkin insisted.

"Don't you put your airs on, Devyatkin," said Fedya calmly.

"We are going, that's all about it."

The stable attendant, Sedelnikova, cut short the argument by saying that there was enough work for all.

They started settling which horse each should drive.

Fedya glanced admiringly at Muromets.

"Nothing doing," Sanka forestalled him. "Each of us has his own horse."

"You take Liska," Petka advised, putting on a serious air. "She's hot stuff. And not allotted to anyone either."

Fedya did not want to argue. "All right then, let it be Liska."

The boys started harnessing the horses.

Sanka watched Fedya out of the corner of his eye. Fedya was holding the collar before Liska, who had reared her head high and did not seem to grasp what was required of her.

"Now he's got a job on," Devyatkin said, laughing behind his hand.

"Hey chum, don't hold us up. We're just going," shouted Sanka intentionally loud, noticing with satisfaction that all the boys were looking at Fedya.

"Come on, let me help you," Devyatkin suggested condescendingly, and going up to Liska he pulled at her bridle.

But the horse's neck seemed to be hewed in stone. Petka threatened her with his fist and reached for the reins. The horse shied aside.

Then Fedya took out of his pocket a piece of bread. He held the bread to Liska's damp pink nostrils, then placed it on the ground.

The smell of the bread broke Liska's haughtiness. She bent her head, reached out for the bread, and thrust her head into the collar herself.

Soon the column of carts set out for the meadow.

The first lot of carts was loaded with hay. Sanka placed Muromets at the head of the column, cast a glance over the carts and the boys standing to attention by the horses, waved his hand, and at the top of his voice gave the order:

"By your carts! Forward, march!"

Without any hurry Muromets moved forward with his heavy load. The other carts started, creaking and rocking in rhythm after him.

When they had left the muddy woodland road behind, Sanka allowed the boys to climb on to the carts. But he himself strode on beside Muromets, with his hands behind his back as his father used to do, and kept an attentive eye on the road, noticing every rut and ditch, every dip and rise.

The horses breathed noisily, the bridles jingled, the wheels creaked and gave off a heady smell of tar. The climbing sun shone brighter and brighter.

They came to a steep descent in the road. Sanka whistled and the carts stopped. He cautiously led Muromets downhill, then the second horse, the third and the fourth. Liska's turn came.

"It's all right, I'll try myself," Fedya said, and he took the horse by the bridle.

Any moment, it seemed, Liska would yield to the pressure of the cart behind her, knock the boy aside and plunge into gallop.

But the small clenched fist kept a firm grip on the bridle. Fedya's voice had the authority of the master in it, and the horse, its head almost out of its collar, submissively squatted on its hind legs and slid rather than walked down the incline.

At last the descent was over. Fedya relaxed his benumbed hand, drew a deep breath, and patted Liska on the neck.

Sanka sighed with relief. Then, remembering himself, he observed patronizingly:

"You led her down all right. A lot of shouting though. Don't get so excited next time."

Fedya got up on the cart. He felt a little dizzy. The cart rocked like a cradle. The sweet smell of the hay, the creaking of the wheels, the snorting of the horses, the colourful festive fields around, the warm wind in his face—everything was so fine that it reminded him of the time when he had lived with his mother on a state farm.

Shading his eyes from the sun, Fedya looked at the road. If you crossed all those fields and then went through the woods, where the air in summer was so laden with the scent of pine bark and ferns, as far as the station, and then travelled two stops down the line, you would arrive towards evening at Visokoye State Farm. There you had to go uphill to the workers' houses, count up to the third house from the end, a small white one that looked as though washed for a holiday, and knock at the little window—that was what Fedya always did when he arrived home late.

"Is that you, you forest mushroomer?" his mother would ask fretfully. "I was just going to start a search. Sit down and have your supper quickly."

"I wasn't lost at all, Mum," Fedya would assure her. "I came across such a rich spot. Look how many mushrooms I've brought." And, tucking into his noodle soup, he would tell his mother all about the mossy clearings and the dense fir-groves where the mushrooms grew thick.

Fedya sighed and buried his face in the hay. It was better not to look at the road.

"Hey, on the carts there! Keep your eyes open!" he heard Sanka's voice shouting.

Fedya opened his eyes. The carts were coming to a place where the ground sloped steeply away from the road. Petka Devyatkin was in front of him. His cart gave a sudden lurch sideways.

"Devyatkin, more to the left!" yelled Fedya. "Dozing are you? To the left, I tell you!"

Petka did not stir.

Without a second thought, Fedya jumped down and rushed to Devyatkin's cart. Sanka came dashing up from the other side. Almost at the same time they put their shoulders under the overturning cart.

The smothering, scorching load fell on the boys, shutting out daylight, and taking their breath away. Hundreds of prickly stalks jabbed their faces like needles.

"Lawks! They've got crushed!" Timka shouted from the last cart, starting to run towards the meadow.

After a struggle the horse got past the steep side slope, the right-side wheels of the cart, which had been lifted off the ground, dropped into the rut again, the cart righted itself and heaved off the boys.

Red in the face with exertion, Sanka rubbed his shoulders and chest, craned his head back, and suddenly noticed Devyatkin on the cart grinning.

"You! Gaping and dozing there!" With a furious shout, Sanka jumped up, caught hold of Devyatkin's feet and hauled him off the cart.

"You're off your rocker, Konshak!" Devyatkin muttered, shaking off the dust and stepping back. "Can't a chap have a nap sometimes!"

"Clear off. I don't need carters like you! Fedya, you'll look after two carts."

"Right!" Fedya saluted and looked at Sanka.

Pricked by the grass stalks and covered with tiny drops of blood, the boy's face looked as if it had been splashed with currant juice.

"You need a wash," Fedya said.

"So do you."

They went down the little ravine to the spring, splashed water on their faces and wiped themselves with their shirts.

Sanka kept glancing at Fedya and saying to himself: "The kid's not so bad. You can work with him anyhow."

Then he started cursing the side-slope on the road.

"It ought to be made up level," Fedya suggested.

"That's an idea," Sanka agreed. "We'll bring spades when we come back."

The carts resumed the journey. Just as they were reaching the village Timka and the terrified Masha and Katerina overtook them.

Masha cast a suspicious glance at Sanka, and Katerina started questioning the boys about what had happened.

"It was nothing," Sanka shrugged his shoulders and winked at Fedya.

"Timka's been seeing things," Fedya corroborated. "It was the heat, I suppose. The blood went to his head."

In the evening, the boys unharnessed the horses and drove them out in the fields for the night.

Whether it was because Muromets wanted to be near Liska, or for some other reason, Sanka was by Fedya's side most of the time.

"You put your shoulder under just in time," said Sanka, looking away. "I could never have held up the cart alone."

"Neither could I," Fedya admitted.

"Where did you learn to mow and look after horses?"

"On a state farm. My mother always used to take me to the fields."

"My father taught me. . . ."

Both were silent. Suddenly Sanka said: "If you like, you can cart the hay with Muromets tomorrow. I'll take Liska."

"But Muromets is your horse," Fedya said with a smile.

"It doesn't matter. We'll change for a while."

A RAINY DAY

The Stozhari folk managed to finish the haymaking just in time before a long spell of warm rain set in. The collective-farm women were able to have a short rest. The children, above all, were glad of the rain; at last they could go to the woods for mushrooms, and to the marsh for bilberries, at last they could go fishing and find out what the nut harvest would be like that year.

In the morning Sanka got up at the same time as his mother and dressed quickly.

"Where are you off so early?" said his mother. "Have another hour or so of sleep. You don't need to go to the meadow today."

"You know where I'm going—to the stables." Sanka pulled his belt tight and set his cap at a rakish angle on his temple. But suddenly, conscious of his mother's gaze fixed on him, he turned round.

"What are you looking at me like that? Anything wrong?"

"There's no need to go to the stables for a while; they'll manage," said Katerina. "Your teacher's expecting you today."

"Which teacher?" Sanka inquired, puzzled.

"Nadezhda Petrovna. She said she would look after you and coach you for the exams."

Thus taken unawares, Sanka was at a loss what to answer.

"I'm not going there to play, you know. I get paid for looking after the horses."

"We'll get along without your wages," Katerina sighed. "You're playing clever aren't you, up to all sorts of tricks while your father's away. Just you tell me straight out: don't you like school? Is the nut too hard for you to crack? Would you rather take it easy, like Petka Devyatkin?"

Sanka flushed, threw back his head and was about to say something, but the words stuck in his throat. He went to the wall and took down the bridle hanging on it.

"What are you doing!" Katerina called angrily. "I might as well speak to the wind as to you."

She ran up to her son, snatched the bridle out of his hand and threw it in a corner.

"You've nothing to do in the stables. Have breakfast and go to your teacher's. So long as you live with me I will not allow you to give up school. Get that into your head!"

"Don't shout at me," Sanka muttered and, pushing the door wide open with his shoulder, he went out.

He arrived at the stables grimmer than a storm cloud. For no reason at all he shouted at the submissive Muromets and threatened Liska, who nearly bit him on the shoulder in return.

"What's come over you, lad?" Sedelnikova scolded. "Been eating soap? Here, go and cool off." And she sent him to the saddler's for a horse-collar.

Returning in an hour, Sanka noticed Tatyana Rodionovna by the stables. She was sitting near the horse-trough talking to Sedelnikova about something.

"Come over here, will you Konshakov," she ordered in a sour voice. "Sit down. Now then, out with it."

The boy approached the trough uncertainly. "Out with what?"

"What have you driven your mother to? Hot tongs wouldn't wrench a complaint out of her, and now she comes to me in tears, trembling all over. You say you care for your mother, but you don't show it much."

Sanka came nearer. "Tatyana Rodionovna..."

"I know what you're going to say, quite well. You want to live your own life. Isn't it rather early? Are you serious about giving up school?"

"Let the others go to school. I'm going to be a collective farmer," he burst out.

"A collective farmer!" came the surprised reply. "What's your idea of that? You can harness horses, follow the harrow or the plough, swing a scythe in the meadow, so you think you're a full-blown collective farmer. But the peasant of old could do that too. Do you know anything about the soil? You think, once you've ploughed your strip and sown, the seed will grow itself. But how should the soil be ploughed? Deep or shallow? How should the earth be turned up?"

What seeds should be sown? "No, Sanka, the collective farmer of today is supposed to know a lot more. You're only a young fledgling."

"My Dad didn't finish a seven-year school either," Sanka observed quietly. "He had less schooling than me. Yet what a collective farmer he was. Found out everything himself."

Tatyana Rodionovna turned away. "I know what he was like. But you don't seem to know at all. Was it Yegor Platonovich's fault that he attended school only three winters? When he was over thirty he would still go to Andrei Ivanich to make up for what he had missed. So there you are," the chairwoman rose. "You'll have to leave the stables for the present. Do what your mother says—go to the schoolteacher for lessons. I'll find you another assistant, Vasilisa."

Sanka looked at Sedelnikova. She made a gesture with her hands: orders were orders.

The boy walked despondently away from the stables.

The tiresome drizzle set in again. The wet trees looked downcast with their drooping leaves; the earth was soft and soggy.

"So she went complaining to the chairwoman," Sanka thought, mortified. "She thinks everything's all right at home. If only she knew..."

He stopped, hesitating, near the house. He did not want to go in. If he met his mother, there would be more unpleasant words.

Petka's mother stuck her head out of the next-door window. "What are you doing in the rain like a bush in a field?" she asked. "Come in and get dry."

Sanka went in and sat down by the door.

"Cleared you out, young stable-boy, have they?" Petka whispered. "So that's how they can't do without you."

"They all keep you on a lead, don't give you a chance," Yevdokia observed. "You just stick to me, I'll find you a job."

"Auntie Yevdokia," Sanka inquired after a pause, "that cobbler business ... does it take long to learn it?"

"Long? Why should it? In three months you'll be up to the job." She cast a glance at the boys. "What are you two pouting about? Why don't you go and look for mushrooms? It's just the time."

"Yes, Konshak, let's go!" Petka's spirits rose. "Styopa has taken the whole Vekshin brigade to Subotinskaya grove. He'll be showing them our places again."

Sanka agreed—they could stay in the woods till evening.

An hour later they reached the grove.

The very first tree Sanka brushed his shoulder against showered him heavily with large raindrops. He jumped aside, but the wet branch of a buckthorn daubed his face.

The wind blew in the tree tops and Sanka got another shower. But he soon got used to it.

It was quiet and cool in the woods. Here and there red spurge-laurel berries glistened; large blue whortle-berries and gleaming clusters of red bilberries were often to be found. And in the glades bloomed dripping mauve immortelles.

Rotting stumps smelt of turpentine, and the white-speckled caps of "fly-killers" showed up from afar.

Sanka walked along, brisk and light-footed, casting sharp glances into the coppices and trying not to miss a single clearing.

But at every step one of the Vekshin brigade cut across his path, and the wood echoed with their calls.

Sanka went farther away to the side. But he was not favoured with mushrooms that day.

Half an hour had already gone and all he had at the bottom of his basket were a few young birch mushrooms, a dozen or so russula already spoilt by snails, slimy, soapy-looking butter mushrooms. At last, in a dense birch-grove, Sanka spied a few larger mushrooms.

"Ceps!" he guessed from afar and his heart, as would that of any keen mushroom gatherer, gave a leap.

But the ceps turned out to be rotten and worm-eaten all through. Sanka kicked them in anger. He walked round for a while and then came out into a glade.

The other mushroom gatherers had assembled there too. Only Fedya was missing.

The children looked at one another's baskets and their spirits fell. They would have to go home along the back of the village, not

along the street, so that the people would not see how few mushrooms they had got.

Syomushkin proposed to go to the marsh to gather bilberries before it was too late.

"Look! Look!" Masha suddenly exclaimed, pointing into the wood.

They all turned and saw Fedya through the bushes. He was going along slowly, with small steps, often stopping and looking about him, retracing his steps and going round every bush, first one way, then the other.

The children ran to him and gasped with astonishment. His basket was half full of mushrooms. On the top there were even three ceps, with thick, snow-white stems.

Fedya looked into the other children's baskets and shook his head.

"Not up too much," he said. "What have you been doing?"

"Now that is a haul. He's actually found some ceps!" Petka chimed in with a sneer. "We know why you put the ceps on top . . . just to show off. But underneath they're all worm-eaten ones and toadstools".

"Toadstools? What for?" Fedya turned his basket upside down, emptied the mushrooms out on the grass and started sorting them. "You can check them if you like."

He left only the birch mushrooms and the ceps in his own basket, and laid the russula, the chanterelles and the butter mushrooms aside.

"Help yourselves, those who haven't got many."

"You're lucky, Fedya," Masha sighed. "But we just can't find any."

"Yes, there aren't many yet," Fedya agreed. "But you can find some. You've got a queer way of looking for them, though. Take you, Masha. You go running and hopping about as though you were after a hare. And you, Alyosha, bother more about berries and nuts. That doesn't get you anywhere. This is what Grandad taught me: 'fly-killers' and toadstools are the only ones that grow where you can see them, you've got to probe for the good ones. Look," he pointed to the ground round him, "you can't see a single mushroom here, can you?" He got down on his knees, and felt in the grass,

raking aside the previous year's leaves and lifting up the carpet of moss. "But there's a birch mushroom for you, and there's another, and another. That's a place for chanterelles," he nodded in the direction of a sparse wood in which pines alternated with young birches. "There's a clearing where russula grow, and milk caps hide there."

And, sure enough, the children started finding now light orange chanterelles, now whitish woolly milk caps.

The children's baskets filled visibly.

"But why aren't you picking any yourself?" Masha asked Fedya.

"Mine won't run away," he answered, looking towards the wood. "Here's the beginning of the fir-grove. Now we'll start finding ceps."

He drew aside the long prickly branches and crawled deep into the grove. Masha and Syomushkin exchanged glances and then crawled after him. Soon the fir-grove was echoing with the girl's cries of delight. Then all was quiet.

Petka beckoned Sanka towards the grove: "What are they doing there? Let's have a look."

Sanka did not refuse. He was already burning with curiosity. He had always considered himself a skilful, sharp-sighted mushroom gatherer, but Fedya's way of gathering mushrooms was new to him.

In the dense grove, under the thick screen of the branches, it was dusky and cool as in a vault. Everything—the previous year's dry needles, the small twigs, the moss, the very air—seemed bathed in brown.

Fedya, Masha and Syomushkin were crawling over the mossy carpet ferreting out ceps. Masha was murmuring to herself. The biggest mushroom of all, with the loose, slanting cap she called grandfather, two smaller ones, father and mother, and the young hard white ones like pebbles, grandchildren.

Petka dropped his basket in surprise, squatted down, and started raking in the moss.

"Bags, this is our bed!" Alyosha shouted. Sanka pulled Devyatkin back out of the grove. Once they had been told "bags," there was nothing they could do about it.

"The lucky dogs," Devyatkin sighed enviously. "They'll clean up all our mushrooms now."

"What do you mean—our mushrooms?" Sanka inquired angrily.

He was thoroughly upset. How could he go back home with an empty basket?

"Why do you keep following me like a shadow?" he shouted at Devyatkin. And with a "Isn't the wood big enough for you?" he left him and plunged into the dense grove.

Without realizing it, he soon began looking for mushrooms in Fedya's unhurried way, often stopping, falling on his knees and rummaging in the grass with his hands.

This method yielded better results. He started finding even ceps.

Towards evening the mushroom gatherers went back to Stozhari.

They did not stop in the street, but neither did they step along quickly, for they wanted everyone they met to see their baskets full of choice mushrooms.

Sanka sat for a while outside the yard, and only when it was quite dark did he quietly enter the cottage. The lamp was turned down; obviously everybody was asleep. Sanka felt hungry. On the table he noticed a loaf and an earthenware pot of milk. He sat down and could not help looking behind him.

Her head raised from the pillow, his mother was looking at him.

Sanka pushed the milk pot away and got up.

"Go on, get something to eat, my strutting cock," said Katerina in a sad voice. Then, after a pause, she added: "Have you heard the news, Sanka? Andrei Ivanich, your schoolmaster, has come back. They say he won't leave Stozhari any more now."

CHAPTER 23

WELCOME!

Nobody called the children together, but in the morning they all gathered, as though by arrangement, in front of the Rakitins' cottage.

It was still quite early and the dew chilled their legs, so they all perched on the fence in a row, like swallows on a wire.

Masha looked out of the window:

"Andrei Ivanich has been asking about you all, but he's not up yet."

"We'll wait, we won't make any noise," Syomushkin whispered.

"But what shall we say to Andrei Ivanich when he wakes up?" Zina Kolesova asked in the same tone.

"Yes, that's true," Syomushkin said excitedly. "We need some kind of greeting. You know, something like this: 'in the name of your former pupils, now in the seventh class, congratulations on your return.'"

"That's right," Zina agreed. "Syomushkin, you manage such things better than anybody, you say it. And we should present him with flowers... there are daisies, water-lilies..."

"And we can catch fish," Styopa suggested.

But Masha checked them. "We don't need any flowers, we don't need anything."

"It isn't right somehow, without a present," said Zina.

"We'll take him to the fields, to the woods, to Grandad Vekshin on his plot. We'll show him round the whole day. We'll show him everything, the corn, the grass..."

"And the fish in our river, and the sky and the sun," scoffed Alyosha. "Talk sense, and tell us how we are to greet him."

"There's no need for all that," said Styopa. "We'll just say: 'Good morning, Andrei Ivanich. We've missed you so much...'"



"And I didn't come for so long," said a quiet voice. "But it can't be helped, my friends. It was a long way I had to come."

The children looked round. A tall spare man, dressed in a soldier's tunic was coming down the porch steps.

"But I have come at last."

Andrei Ivanich stretched out his left hand towards the children, for where his right arm should have been, an empty sleeve was hanging limp like the broken wing of a bird.

The children exchanged glances and drew back a pace.

"It's all right, friends," said Andrei Ivanich, noticing their confusion. "One arm is not a big price for such a war."

The teacher seemed to have grown broader across the shoulders and taller, and a thick moustache made his face look older and more severe; but his bright eyes shone as calm as of old.

The children, rejoicing that fate had kept for them those bright eyes, that solid head and that powerful frame, gathered round Andrei Ivanich, and on their teacher's large hand their small ones came to rest like trustful doves.

Andrei Ivanich gazed a long time at the children. How many times in the heat of battle or in short spells of rest had he recalled all those childish faces. How often, on dark wild nights had those children's



eyes shone on him like stars in the firmament, lightening the ordeals of the soldier's life.

There was his niece Masha, impulsive and restless as fire; there was Zina, sensible and sparing of words; Syomushkin, his nose always twitching as though he were sniffing at something; and kind-hearted Styopa Karasyov. How they had all filled out and matured!

Styopa's head was covered with a thick shock of hair, and looked round as a ball. How often, before the war, had Andrei Ivanich kept the boy in after school to cut his hair with the clippers.

The teacher put his hand on Styopa's head.

Styopa flushed deeply. "I do get it cut, Andrei Ivanich, honestly. But it grows and grows, there's no stopping it."

"Gets it cut!" scoffed Syomushkin. "Once in a blue moon!"

"Just you wait," the teacher threatened. "This very day I'll get to work on you and cut it down to size nought."

They all burst out laughing because they knew that Styopa did not like having his hair cut.

Then the teacher noticed a boy, small of stature, who stood behind all the others, not taking his eyes off him.

"Andrei Ivanich, he's a Stozhari boy too," Masha whispered, "Fedya Cherkashin."

The teacher advanced towards him. "How do you do, Fedya. I know about you. Masha wrote me."

"Tell us about the war, Andrei Ivanich," Syomushkin asked when all the children had shaken hands with the teacher.

"You've not changed, Alyosha Syomushkin," Andrei Ivanich said with a smile. "You're just as impatient as you used to be. But there's a lot I want to know too. About you. What your life has been like, my friends, what you have been doing. Come along, show me your domains."

The children glanced at one another. What could they show him? Just their little experimental plot?

"Well, have you nothing to show me?" Andrei Ivanich asked in surprise. "What about the fields that I can see from here? And the meadows, and the woods, and our little river?"

Masha looked proudly at the others. Had she not guessed what presents would please the teacher most?

The children took Andrei Ivanich round the collective farm.

"This is our smithy," Masha announced, pointing to the low smoky little shed. "Uncle Yevsei works there. And there's the farm-yard. It's not long since we finished it." She spoke of everything as if Andrei Ivanich had never seen the smithy and the farm-yard before.

Meeting Andrei Ivanich, the collective-farm women exchanged greetings with him, congratulating him on his return home. Then they would nod at the children.

"So they didn't even give you time to get your breath after your journey."

"The young masters are showing me their domains," answered Andrei Ivanich.

"Well, have a look round, see how we have been getting on by ourselves."

After going round the farm buildings, the children led their teacher out to the fields.

Everything gladdened Andrei Ivanich that morning: the stands of green corn waving in the wind, the lilac-pink carpet of the clover field, the colourful herd of cows in the pastures, the leisurely flow of the river.

He made stops everywhere, attentively examining everything, listening long to the twitter of the birds.

Gradually the tongues of the children were loosened. They told him that there were far more birds and beasts in the wood than before the war. Where had they all come from? Wolves and wild boars had appeared in the woods, and one day, a huge antlered elk had joined the cowherd, roaming the whole day among the cows and frightening the life out of Petushok the bull.

More and more children joined the group. Each was in a hurry to share some item of news with the teacher.

One had found new mushroom beds, another had learned to tickle chub in the river, another could manage fine with horses.

Then Alyosha Syomushkin captured the teacher's attention. He showed snares and traps of his own make which he had set near *suslik*

holes, and announced that he had "planned" to catch two thousand *susliks* during the summer.

"But what did the *susliks* think of your plan?" the teacher asked with a smile.

"They accepted it," said Masha. "but only frogs get caught in the traps."

Syomushkin took offence and at once suggested that they should all lie down in concealment by the *suslik* holes, so as to see for themselves how unfailingly his traps worked.

But Masha protested that they might lie there the whole day that way, and there was so much that they had to go and see.

"Whose crop is that?" Andrei Ivanich stopped near a stand of wheat, evenly planted and free of weeds.

"Katerina Konshakova, Sanka's mother," said Masha.

"Oh, but where is Sanka Konshakov?" asked the teacher. "Why is he nowhere to be seen? You and he used to be friends, Masha."

"Well . . . we've not fallen out . . ." Masha faltered, "but he's changed somehow. . . ."

"Just how has he changed?"

"He——" Syomushkin was about to say something, but Masha, already regretting her words, nudged his elbow and drew Andrei Ivanich's attention to the willow bushes by the river, where Sanka and his pals were cutting switches for baskets.

"There's Konshakov. I'll call him if you like."

"Do, Masha dear."

The girl ran along the footpath.

Noticing Masha turn in his direction, Sanka plunged into the bushes.

For some time he had been watching the girl leading Andrei Ivanich over the field. How happy Masha was. And no wonder. Her own uncle had come back from the war. Time would pass and others would also see their fathers and brothers coming back—Alyosha Syomushkin, Styopa So-by-So and many other Stozhari children.

Yegor Konshakov was the only one who would not come home. . . .

And how Sanka would have loved to spend a whole day going round the collective farm with his father, showing him the buildings.

the towering hayricks, the crops in the fields, the quiet fishing spots on the river.

"Where are you, Sanka? Come with us. What are you hiding for? Andrei Ivanich wants to see you," Masha called.

But Sanka, like a little wounded animal, crept still deeper into the bushes, dragging behind him his bundle of switches. His heart was aching.

Not understanding where Sanka could have disappeared to, Masha shook her head and went back to the teacher.

CHAPTER 24

NUMBER FIVE BED

It now remained to show Andrei Ivanich the most interesting place of all. His pupils finally led him to the experimental plot. Masha cautiously opened the wicket and let them all in.

Grandad Vekshin was walking between the beds, examining the crops.

Masha raised a warning finger at the children: "Be quiet . . . we'll play a joke on him."

She did not know herself what the joke would be, but the imp which had possessed her since morning was giving her no rest.

She ran up to Grandad Vekshin.

"Grandad, here's a man who's interested in our experiments."

"What man?"

"An army man, from the front. He's asking how we're off for new crops."

"So you've already managed to let the cat out of the bag!" said Grandad testily. "Don't you remember our bargain?"

"This man can be told. . . ." Masha was about to say, but raising his head, the old man suddenly pushed her aside and went forward.

"Who's that I see! Andrei Ivanich! Dear old friend!" he exclaimed. And after a hasty glance at the teacher's empty right sleeve he added: "So you're out of the army for good?"

Andrei Ivanich embraced Vekshin.

"That's what is on my papers, but I consider myself transferred to another front, so to speak."

"You're right, too," Vekshin agreed. "And what's the news out there? Where are our troops now, Andrei Ivanich?"

"They've gone a long way, Zakhar Mitrich! An order of the day was broadcast yesterday—our troops have liberated Minsk."

Vekshin was overjoyed. "Noble work! By the look of things we'll soon see the end of these evil days. Our old sun will no longer be clouded." The old man glanced over the plot: "You see, we're doing what we can."

"So this is your experimental field?" the teacher asked.

"That's a big name for it, Andrei Ivanich. It's a tiny little plot, not a field. But we've sown a few things all the same. We gathered them little by little, seed by seed. There's long-fibre flax, here's winter-hardy rye, yonder's huskless barley. . . . And that is your present. You remember, you sent it in a letter to the children?" Grandad pointed to a small plot of large-headed clover.

The teacher went unhurriedly round the plot, bending down over the plants, gently fingering flowers and leaves as though greeting them after a long separation.

He presently stopped before some Daghestan hemp, one and a half times as tall as a man. Next to it were a few castor-oil plants, with large, dark green, palm-shaped leaves. In miniature beds farther on, the teacher recognized Amur soya, kok-saghyz, and ground-nut plant whose small lower flowers were burrowing in the earth, there to form "peanuts."

"Where did you get those southerners from?" inquired Andrei Ivanich.

"That you must ask the children," Grandad answered, "those are their nurselings."

"We sowed them on trial," Alyosha explained. "We got the seeds from school."

"Yes, indeed," Grandad shook his head, "they pestered me till I joined in their game. 'Grandad, how shou'd we water them, how should we dung them?' I had no peace from their questions. And I must ad-

mit I never saw such plants in my life. So the whole lot of us put our heads together to find ways of protecting those southerners from frost and cold winds. And it doesn't look bad, the guests seem to have taken root."

"Andrei Ivanich," said Masha, "suppose we sowed ground-nuts in the fields. You know what a valuable plant it is."

"And it would be fine to grow grapes and melons," observed Syomushkin.

"You see their dreams, Andrei Ivanich!" the old man said with a laugh. "They have as many plans in their heads as there are seeds in a cucumber. A keen lot they are, and so persistent."

Andrei Ivanich went up to the thick bushy wheat on number five bed. Water was running down the jointed, transparent stalks; the bearded ears were covered with raindrops fine as dust.

A shaft of sunlight broke through the clouds and the rain-washed corn glittered like crystal.

The teacher even screwed up his eyes and bent down.

"And what kind is this?" he said.

Vekshin, with a warning gesture to the children, as though telling them not to disturb Andrei Ivanich in his examination of the corn, craned forward and did not take his eyes off him.

"Wait a minute, Grandad, but this is. . . ." The teacher turned round and seized the old man's hands: "Yes, it is Yegor Platonovich's corn. No doubt about it."

"You recognize it?" Vekshin asked. "It is, Andrei Ivanich, the very same."

"I should think I do. All the signs are there: the height, the ears. I would recognize it among a hundred. How often I've thought of it. But where did you get it from, Zakhar Mitrich?" The teacher suddenly beckoned to Masha to come near. "What did you and Sanka write to me? That the corn had been destroyed, that not a grain of it had survived."

"Yes," the girl answered in confusion. "And that's how it was too. We looked for it and questioned everybody. But nobody knew anything. And Grandad said it had got lost. . . . Didn't you, Grandad?"

"Yes, I did say so," Vekshin scratched the back of his head in em-



barrassment. Then he drew Fedya towards him. "It was through him that it all started again. He's the one to thank."

Seeing that both Andrei Ivanich and the children were puzzled, he exchanged a glance with his grandson and related all the adventures of the grains of wheat.

* * *

When the nazi troops were approaching Stozhari, Grandad Vekshin loaded his old Berdan rifle and went to the partisans in the woods.

The partisan commander—the director of the local Machine and Tractor Station—was angry when the old man reported to him, and ordered Vekshin to go back home immediately and drive the collective-farm herd eastwards.

But the old man refused point-blank: the women and youngsters could manage with the cattle, whereas he was a man, and knew the forest roads and tracks like the palm of his hand; he was not a bad shot either, and he could assuredly put a dozen or two of those rotten nazis to sleep in Russian soil. Besides, there was still the Pushkin Collective Farm orchard with about a hundred and fifty trees in it, the houses and the crops, and those riches could not be driven east like cattle.

"So you'll be the collective-farm guard, will you?" asked the commander. "You hope to defend it against the enemy?"

"We'll see."

And Vekshin did not leave the detachment. Work was soon found for him too. He used to mend the partisans' boots, patch their clothes, get their meals ready and cure them with herbs.

Sometimes, disguised as a beggar, he made his way into the villages to find out whether there were any Hitler troops or police there, and who had been appointed elder over the Soviet citizens.

In the woods, he one day came across Fedya Cherkashin, who was living wild there. Grandad brought the boy to the detachment.

Fedya used to help him to run the partisans' household, and to collect healing herbs, mushrooms and berries.

They started to go round the villages together. Where it was dangerous for an adult as conspicuous as Grandad to show himself, the small, nimble Fedya could easily penetrate.

The men in the detachment grew to love the boy, and when they found out that he had neither father nor mother, many wanted to adopt him.

"I'm not an orphan, I've got Grandad," Fedya would answer.

He and Grandad once made their way into Stozhari. The nazis had established themselves as bosses there. There were guards in the fields, which had become the property of some important German landlord. The harvest that year was an exceptional one.

Among the crops, Vekshin found the plot on which Yegor Platonovich's corn was. For all Katerina's trampling, a few isolated stems of wheat had survived, raised themselves, and stood now, weighed down with heavy ripe ears.

Vekshin groaned with grief. "What a variety we have grown! And who for? For fascist worms! But not an ear of it will be left behind, not a grain!" He looked intently at the boy—"Can you rob other people's peas? Can you rob orchards and gardens?"

"I did, once or twice," the boy admitted in confusion.

"You boys are all cut on the same pattern, you've made my life a misery. But now, my little Fedya, you can do noble work. If you only get three ears. Can you?"

"I'll manage it, Grandad," Fedya agreed. "I'll pick every ear."

At night he got through to the wheat, and towards morning the old man and the boy brought back to camp a bag full of ears. There they shelled the grains, winnowed them in the wind, and put them in a little haversack.

"Rather early to get ready for the sowing, isn't it, Grandad?" the partisans asked him. "We've not yet cleared the enemy from the land, and you're thinking of sowing."

"It's just the time. The earth is not a destroyer like the nazis. If there's seed, there'll be corn too. This good grain will not vanish now."

The detachment commander reprimanded Vekshin and Fedya, and most strictly forbade them to carry out such sorties, but he was glad of the grain and ordered the men to guard it like the apple of their eye.

In the spring heavy fighting broke out. The front line was steadily approaching the partisan area. Liaison with our troops had to be established. Grandad Vekshin volunteered to make his way through the line. Fedya joined him.

"You're such a little fellow," the detachment commander said, shaking his head. "You should be running in the fields and playing knucklebones, not doing things like this. It's dangerous, you know, you must be ready for anything."

"I'm always ready!" said Fedya.

"So you're a Young Pioneer, are you? Well, off you go, young fellow!" And the commander hugged the boy hard.

So off went Fedya and his Grandad. At first they tramped through marshes and thickets of fallen trees, sinking to the waist in the soggy ground. When they gained the river, Grandad went in search of a ford by which to cross it. Fedya waited, crouching in the thick grass. Suddenly he heard dull noises and shouts from behind the bushes. He was about to rush in the direction of the noise, when the long melancholy whistle of the oriole reached his ears. That was the signal they had agreed on. "I've been caught," Grandad Vekshin was telling him. "Get through to our troops alone."

Fedya picked up Grandad's haversack and crossed the river, sitting astride a thick log.

Two days later our troops broke through the enemy defences and chased the nazis westwards, freeing many Soviet citizens, among them Grandad Vekshin.

The old man hurried to search for Fedya. The boy was nowhere to be found. No matter whom Grandad wrote to or what inquiries he made, nobody knew anything about his grandson.

It was only six months later, when life had begun to settle down in Stozhari, that Grandad Vekshin got a letter from the distant city of Tashkent. Fedya wrote that he had fulfilled the commander's order in time, but had been slightly wounded and was in hospital.

"The long and short of it is," Grandad ended his tale, "that my little grandson at last reached me and brought the wheat with him."

"And you said nothing about it all this time. What a fellow you are, Zakhar Mitrich!" said the teacher reproachfully. "Why, that would have been better than any fairy-tale for the children."

"I wasn't sure, Andrei Ivanich: suppose the grain had got stale, suppose there was no life left in it. Why lead people to expect too much?"

A light wind broke over the plot and played in the crops. The ears started rustling as much as to say: "We're alive! We're alive!"

"Well, I'm sure now. The wheat is vigorous, it has formed ears, and it has bloomed. Soon we shall gather the harvest."

CHAPTER 25

LAPTA

Each having cut a large bundle of supple young switches, Sanka's company emerged from the broom thicket and started for home. Sanka lagged gloomily behind. Everything made him feel out of sorts that day: the dense grey clouds in the sky, every now and then shedding drizzling rain, the senseless jabber of the jackdaws over the fields, and Petka's whimpering about it not being worth while making baskets if they were sold dirt cheap.

"Oh, shut up about your baskets!" Sanka snapped at him. "I'm fed up with them."

"That's what I'm saying—it's not worth it," Petka repeated. "My mother wants you to call and see her."

"What for?"

"Can't you guess? We've got to decide what to do about that cobbling. She has arranged everything with Uncle Yakov. Pelageya Kolehkina is letting Timka go too."

The boys got as far as Vekshin's experimental plot and sat down by the fence for a rest.

"Why are you so moody, Konshak, like a moulting hen?" Petka rattled on. "Is it the weather making you fed-up? Or perhaps you're afraid of the schoolmaster? I saw him send Masha for you. 'Bring me that Konshakov!'"

"What's the schoolmaster to me?" Sanka shrugged his shoulders. Feeling that that was not what he had meant to say, he blushed and turned away.

"'Course he's nothing to us," Petka replied. "Nothing at all. One time it was always: 'in you come for a haircut.' And he'd sit you on the chair, cut your hair down to size nought and keep asking you why you broke a branch off the apple-tree, or why you checked so-and-so in the street? A real lecture. Rotten business! But now we're out of his reach. We're grown up now, we're working men. Step right in, gents—soles, hee's, uppers! Easy as pie!" Petka waxed bolder and bolder, and even brought out his tobacco pouch. "If he came here now, I'd say to him, 'Here, smoke mine. That is, if you can stand real baccy.'"

"Who will you say that to?" Sanka turned round.

"Him, Andrei Ivanich."

But Sanka gave Petka such a look that the latter moved away in fright and, with a sigh, gave up all hope of talking to Konshak that day.

Petka was bored too. He did not like it when people round him would not talk or do anything, when nobody was bullying or teasing anybody else.

Petka plucked off the heads of a plant with a pungent smell like snuff, rubbed them between his hands and stuffed them in the dozing Timka Kolehkin's nose. Timka jumped up, sneezed, shook his fist at Petka, and then lay down again in the burdock.

Bored to death, Devyatkin peeped through the fence at the plot. Then he went and sat down beside Sanka again.

"The Vekshin brigade's strawberries are fine!" he whispered suggestively. "They're quite ripe now. You can almost reach them through the fence. What about having a try, eh?"

"Stealing berries is not in my line."

"Afraid of offending Masha and Fedya?"

"They don't mean a thing to me."

"Prove it, have a try."

"You heard what I said."

"Just to taste them, Sanka. We won't take any with us. And Grandad Vekshin won't find out. Of course we'll make a proper raid, we'll put out scouts, then we two will crawl in——"

Sanka gave no reply.

"Well, it's up to you," Petka rose with a sigh. "If you don't want to come, I can go with Timka. But mind you, Konshak, you'll be sorry. Those strawberries are sweeter than honey or sugar. They'll make your mouth water."

"You dare!" Sanka gave Petka's arm a violent tug. "Sit down. You're not going anywhere."

Petka sighed and looked at the others, as much as to say: "Just look what a tough, daring chap I am. I'd treat you all to those luscious strawberries if it wasn't for Sanka."

"What about a game of *lapta*?" he suggested lazily. "Have you got your ball, Timka?"

"Here it is," answered Timka.

They picked sides.

But the game was a dull one. Petka decided to brighten things up. With a cunning stroke he sent the ball high in the air so that it curved over the plot and fell like a stone inside the fence.

The boys were taken aback. Timka was the most upset of all. His brother had given him that bouncy rubber ball when he was home for a while from the front some time before, and Timka treasured it. He flew like a cock at Devyatkin, demanding that he should go at once and ask Grandad Vekshin to let the boys into the garden to look for the ball.

"What are you talking about, Timka?" said Petka, backing away. "Catch Vekshin letting anyone in. You know how fierce he is. I wouldn't go for that ball, not for a hundred roubles, I'll buy you a new one. Wait till I go to town."

"Buy me a new one. You dropped Vanka Strokin's mouth organ in the pond. . . . That was a year ago and you're still buying it."

"But I paid Vanka for it—I treated him to sunflower seeds the whole winter."

"Oh, did you!" snorted ginger-headed Strokin. "Bought a glassful and shared it among the whole class, that's the way you paid for my mouth organ."

Although Petka swore solemnly that he would bring a ball from town, not one, in fact, but two, Timka would not believe him. He went away and lay down in the grass a little way off.

Sanka felt sorry for Timka. With a glowering look at Devyatkin he beckoned him over.

"What's up?" asked Devyatkin perplexed.

"Don't act the fool," said Sanka calmly. "Get that ball!"

"Why, how can I, Sanka?" inquired Devyatkin aghast.

"Slip into the plot and find it. Use your experience."

"But there are plants there."

"You'll find it, you'll find it," cried the other boys, whom Sanka's suggestion greatly pleased. "We saw where it fell—by the fence, over there to the left."

Devyatkin tried to find excuses. Of course it was not so hard to get into the plot, but it would be better at dusk or in the evening.

"And then you'll look for the ball with a lantern?" asked Strokin.

"Tomorrow morning then, I'll get up early and find it."

"See that!" Sanka burst out. "For strawberries he was ready to go at once. But now he's got the wind up. All right, Devyatkin, sit down, I'll go by myself."

"You?" Petka stared at Sanka and suddenly grinned. So Sanka didn't mind feasting on strawberries, only he had to find a good excuse. "I'll go anywhere with you."

Sanka and Devyatkin approached the plot from the side where a spreading bird-cherry tree rose by the fence. Sanka swarmed up the

trunk, sat astride a thick branch, and, holding a stick down to Petka, helped him to clamber on to the tree too. They sat still for a couple of minutes, and then Sanka started to work his way along a branch overhanging the fence. The farther he got away from the trunk, the more the flexible, springy branch bent; at last it touched the earth.

Devyatkin started to cross over in the same way, but then there was a hitch.

"What's the matter?" Sanka asked in a whisper.

"It's all right for you, you're as light as a feather. . . ."

"It will bear you, it's bird-cherry."

Petka started to move cautiously forward.

Suddenly he fell like a sack of corn on top of Sanka and gasped out in a frightened whisper:

"The kids are there with the teacher. And Vekshin too."

"Did they notice you?"

"They may have done. Masha has such good eyes, you know; she can see through a brick wall."

For safety's sake the boys hid among some thick raspberry canes near the fence, and listened.

But all was quiet on the plot.

Concluding that Devyatkin had been seeing things, Sanka crawled into the middle of the plot. He kept close to the earth, using now his right, now his left hand to pull himself forward. Sometimes he stopped to wait for Petka. Whenever Petka showed himself, as he frequently did, Sanka would give him a dig with his fist, and then the crawling would go on according to the rules.

But before they had gone ten paces, they heard voices behind the bushes and then saw Grandad Vekshin and the children in a group round the teacher.

"I told you!" Petka whispered. "We're caught now. It's us they're looking for."

The two boys crept back to the raspberry canes. But, as Sanka was quick to realize, the people on the plot were not looking for anybody. They were just walking along the paths, examining the crops and talking about something.

"Vekshin's showing the teacher his outfit," Sanka guessed.

At last they all left the plot. Sanka waited a while and then made a sign to Devyatkin and started crawling on again over the grass. He suddenly noticed that Petka was going off to the side.

"Where are you going?"

Petka nodded in the direction he had taken. "Why, the strawberry beds are over there. I should know better than you."

"What strawberry beds?"

"You are a one!" Devyatkin winked. "As if you needed the ball. Smart aren't you, Konshak?"

Sanka sprang up and rushed at Petka, but then, remembering where he was, he dropped down in the grass again.

"Follow me! Crawl after me!" he ordered Devyatkin in a furious whisper.

Devyatkin turned back dejectedly and followed.

The grass soon ended, and the boys got to thick shoots of oats. Then came beds with barley, rye and wheat.

At last Sanka and Devyatkin reached the left-hand corner of the plot, where they thought they had seen the ball drop, and started rummaging among the crops. They searched for a long time, their knees and elbows were stained green by the crushed stalks, but they could not find the ball. Petka often raised his head to listen.

"It's no use, Konshak," he whined. "Like looking for a needle in a haystack. Do you know what will happen if we get caught? Grandad Vekshin will stuff nettles in our pants and then take us to the management and call our mothers. Let's get out of here while the going's good."

"Look for that ball, I tell you," Sanka hissed, glaring at him. "You started all this."

Behind the bushes there was an unexpected jingle of tins and hoops. Sanka pressed close to the ground, but Devyatkin could stand it no longer and made a dash for the fence.

Sanka shook his fist, but Petka had already parted the twigs in the fence and slipped out of the plot.

Sanka went a little more to the left and began to look for the ball again. At last his fingers felt its round elastic form. With a sigh of relief he thrust the ball deep into his pocket and plunged out of the plot the same way as Petka.

CHAPTER 26

LOCUSTS

It was a day of reunions for Andrei Ivanich. He had calls from neighbours, collective-farm women and former pupils. Lena Odintsova and her friends came running to see him and wanted to take him with them to the fields. But Andrei Ivanich pleaded mercy:

"You must excuse me, my pupils have been taking me round all the morning, as it is."

After dinner Tatyana Rodionovna assembled the members of the collective farm for a meeting.

The women seated themselves on logs in the shade of the poplars and spreading willows in front of the office.

The children were there too. Not a single gathering took place without them in Stozhari.

Petka Devyatkin, ignoring the disapproving glances of the collective-farm women, rolled himself a cigarette the size of a shepherd's horn.

"Chuck that cigarette away!" Timka whispered in sudden alarm. "The schoolmaster's coming!"

Unperturbed, Devyatkin blew out a cloud of smoke through his nose:

"We're not his pupils any longer."

"Didn't you hear?" Sanka snatched the cigarette away from him and crushed it under his foot.

Andrei Ivanich came up to the logs and—probably for the first time since he had left for the front—did not salute. Instead, he raised his cap and bowed. The collective-farm women moved up to make room for him on the logs.

"Back with us again, Andrei Ivanich?"

"Couldn't you find a better place than our Stozhari?"

"Look to the children, Andrei Ivanich. Since their fathers have been away they've got right out of hand."

"Tell us for sure: will our men soon come back home?"

Katerina Konshakova approached. At the sight of the schoolmaster, she stood quite still, overcome by emotion. She wanted to run up to him, to have a talk about Yegor, to tell him of her fears. Andrei Ivanich rose and went to meet her.

"I know how anxious you are, indeed I do," he whispered. "But don't let your heart get the better of you, Katerina Vasilievna, it often deceives one." He gave her a seat beside him. "They tell me you have not forgotten Yegor's work. Today I saw the field you planted. It's an excellent field."

"What is your opinion, Andrei Ivanich?" Katerina asked eagerly.

"That is good wheat growing there. You must have put a lot of work into it."

"I've got some splendid helpers though—girls from the Young Communist League and school children. They never take their eyes off the crops."

"But the collective farm is still not top of the district. It has lost its pre-war fame."

"That's the truth you're saying, Andrei Ivanich," Katerina sighed. "We're about to take a big job in hand just now, we want to plough up the whole of Staraya Pustosh. It's a big stretch of land."

The collective-farm women started talking about Staraya Pustosh—whether they would manage the job without the men, whether they would have enough plough-hands and horses.

"And what does Andrei Ivanich say about it?" they asked the teacher.

"It's a job worth doing," said the teacher, rising. "Bullets and shells are not the only weapons our people are smashing the fascists with. There's corn too. We must raise our yield and cultivate new varieties."

"We had one fine variety," Katerina said with a sigh. "I destroyed it myself."

"Destroyed it? Not quite." Andrei Ivanich took a small ear of wheat out of his pocket. "Do you recognize that?"

Holding it carefully in her cupped hands, like a fluttering little light just beginning to burn, Katerina looked at the ear for a long time and then called Sanka.

"Sanka, look: just like your father's wheat. Good gracious! Where did you get it from, Andrei Ivanich? Who saved it?"

"There were people to do it."

The teacher told the meeting about what he had seen that day on the children's experimental plot, and what he had learnt from Grandad Vekshin. Then, noticing Styopa, Syomushkin, and Zina Kolesova on the logs, he called them over.

"And here they are. Come along, let the people see you."

Everybody turned towards the children. But Zina and her friends hid behind the trunk of the spreading willow-tree, whispering among themselves.

"Come out all of you where we can see you. What are you hiding there for, like mushrooms under a bush!" the teacher said, laughing. "And where's your Grandad? Where are Masha and Fedya?"

"They are on duty at the plot," replied Syomushkin.

Andrei Ivanich winked at the collective-farm women. "See the way they've got things organized there?"

"Andrei Ivanich," said Katerina, "before the meeting starts, let's just go to the plot and have a look at that wheat of ours."

"That depends on the young masters. Perhaps they won't allow us," the teacher smiled. "They have very strict rules."

"It's all right now," said Syomushkin.

The collective-farm women were just getting up from the logs when Grandad Vekshin appeared out of a side-alley. He was bare-footed and his whiskers were bristling menacingly. Masha and Fedya could hardly keep up with him.

Fedya was carrying Grandad's juniper stick and Masha was trying to make the old man put on his worn felt boots: "Grandad, do put your boots on! Grandad!"

Zakhar would not listen to her. He pushed aside the collective-farm women and went up to Tatyana Rodionovna.

"There! I've always said so: locusts! They'll spoil everything! They'll destroy everything!"

"What locusts?" asked the chairwoman, perplexed.

The old man cast a glance over the Big End boys who stood in a

group among the adults, and suddenly snatched his felt boots out of Masha's hands.

"I'll bring you to your senses, you young locusts!" he shouted, brandishing his felt boots.

But the boys dodged away behind the grown-ups and Vekshin's blows did not fall where they were intended.

Sanka and Petka hurriedly climbed into the spreading old willow.

"Ca'm yourself, you mad giant," Andrei Ivanich checked the old man. "What has happened? Talk sense."

"The wheat on our plot has been trampled, Andrei Ivanich," Fedya said in a low voice. "After you left, Grandad and I went and had dinner, and when we got back we found the wheat on the fifth bed all crushed and trampled on."

The teacher was dumbfounded. "Just a minute, Fedya. How did it happen? We must get this clear."



In two bounds Syomushkin was at Fedya's side.

"Who was on duty today?"

"I was, and I hardly left the plot to go anywhere. Only about a quarter of an hour for dinner."

"Well, that was it! I suppose you left the gate open and the pigs got into the plot."

"But I closed it. I closed it, I tell you. And jammed it with a stake. I remember quite well," Fedya protested.

"It's extraordinary, Zakhar Mitrich," the teacher said, turning to the old man. "The pigs were not there, there was no hail, and yet the wheat is flat."

"It's clear enough to me . . . the boys ruined it," said Vekshin.

"But why should they trample down wheat?" said the teacher wondering. "Now I can understand them picking pears or apples or feasting on berries, that's a thing they do. But to ruin the wheat . . . I just can't make it out. That our boys should wish the collective farm any harm . . . no, that cannot be!"

"It's the war that's spoilt them, they've got out of hand while their fathers have been away." Grandad made a gesture of despair. "They respect nothing now. . . ."

Grandad was supported by the brigade leader Pogosova, who said that the boys had indeed got out of hand; they were impudent to their elders, they bawled songs and played the accordion of an evening; and lately they had even started using the farm horses for races. Grandma Manefa complained that children had carried away half of her garden gale and used it as a raft on the pond. Pelageya Kolechkina reported that all the raspberries in her vegetable garden had been stolen—it wouldn't have been so bad if it was only the ripe ones, but even the green, hard ones had been taken, branches and all.

The boys exchanged embarrassed glances, and began to shiver as though it had suddenly turned cold.

Sanka sat motionless astride a branch of the willow. He felt everybody was looking at him through the leaves, knowing that it was he who had stolen into Vekshin's plot and crushed the wheat on bed number five.

"It's all your fault for pitying Timka!" whispered Petka. "I told you we shouldn't have looked for that ball. Dash the blooming thing!"

"They must be questioned one at a time," said Pogosova, "to find out who's the ring-leader. And if they won't own up, we'll put the responsibility on their parents. They'll get it out of them."

The teacher rubbed his clean-shaven cheek. "It seems to me," he said, "that the one who did the damage will own up honestly and straightforwardly."

"H'm," said Vekshin, "I can't see it happening. The boys in our village are not like that. They can be up to mischief and then hide in the bushes. But answer for what they do? No, they haven't got the grit."

"But I think he will. Our boys are not cowards, they won't hide behind others." The teacher looked slowly from one boy to another and stopped at Sanka.

Sanka could not help shrinking back. And suddenly he felt that Fedya Cherkashin, as well as the teacher, was eying him through the leaves, and he thought he heard Fedya saying: "Why don't you speak, why don't you own up at once?"

"And what does Sanka Konshakov think?" the teacher asked.

Sanka caught his breath. He turned pale, climbed awkwardly down from the tree and said in a low voice:

"I am to blame for it all. . . . The others don't know anything about it. I trampled the wheat."

CHAPTER 27

FISHING

That confession made Grandad jump as though a bee had stung him.

"A-ah! So the locust is caught!" he roared triumphantly and, seizing his juniper stick out of Fedya's hands, he rushed to the willow.

Sanka was obliged to retreat into the tree again. The old man flourished his stick and prodded in the foliage, trying to hook the leg of Sanka's trousers.

"Come down here, you young rascal, come down!"

Sanka realized that no one would stop Grandad now, and that he really was in for a taste of the old man's stick. Without stopping to think, he jumped on to another bough, shut his eyes and sprang down—nearly into Grandma Manefa's arms.

"Stop him, the were-wolf!" shrieked the old woman, frightened out of her wits.

To Sanka it seemed that the whole meeting, the collective farmers, the accountant with her abacus, the chairwoman, and even Andrei Ivanich, were rushing after him.

He jumped over the fence and plunged into a side-alley scattered with lumps of brick, broken glass and all sorts of rubbish; but so impetuous was his flight that he did not even cut his bare feet. After running some distance, he stopped behind the vegetable gardens, near the old barn. He looked back. Nobody was pursuing him. Only Petka Devyatkin in his heavy shoes was pounding up behind.

Sanka frowned. How stupid it had all turned out. He had admitted everything himself and then been scared of the old man's stick and fled like a hare.

He lay down by the barn. A small insect had crawled into the wet bell of a yellow flower and could not manage to get out again; it had got its wings wet and its legs—no thicker than eye-lashes—were slithering down the enamel-like petals. Sanka set the insect on his finger and let it get dry in the sun, after which, spreading out its tiny wings, it flew away.

Limping and puffing, Devyatkin arrived at the barn. He was in a bad mood. You always landed in trouble with a pal like Sanka. Who had asked him to go and blubber out that confession? Gossip would start all over the collective farm, there would be no peace from it in the street. Petka had hurt his foot too, jumping down from the tree. And whose fault was that? Sanka's again.

Suddenly Petka nudged his friend on the shoulder: "Look. They're coming!"

Sanka raised his head.

In the alley stood Andrei Ivanich and Katerina. They were looking round the vegetable gardens, and peeping into every yard and shed.

Sanka seized Petka's hand and dragged him into the semi-darkness of the barn, where there was a smell of damp earth, mice and musty straw.

He would rather the earth had swallowed him up than be seen by his mother and the teacher then.

"Aren't you a noble, honest boy!" Petka went on chiding. "'Here I am. I'm guilty, do what you like with me.' You should have kept your mouth shut. Let them whistle for the culprit. You innocent little saint, you greenhorn!"

At those words Sanka was up like a shot. With a leap he drove his fist into something soft—whether it was Petka's nose or his chin he did not know.

"It's all your fault, you rotten turncoat!"

Expecting Petka to show fight, Sanka prepared himself for a real tussle in which he would pay Petka back for everything.

But Petka made no attempt to fight back. He flopped on the ground, buried his head in his hands and started whimpering:

"You have no right to lay your hands on me, you haven't."

Sanka spat in disgust and turned away. Then he looked cautiously out of the barn. Neither the teacher nor his mother was to be seen in the vegetable garden.

Petka was still snivelling, rubbing his chin and muttering something about how ungrateful friends were these days. He was ready to do anything for Sanka, he was even waiting to go and learn shoemaking until Sanka made up his mind to go too, and all he got for it was punches and jeering.

Sanka gave him a dig. "Shut up! I ought to have punched you twice as hard!"

Sanka cast a glance at the fields, at the jagged crest of the forest shimmering bluish in the distance, and at the mowed field on which the horses were grazing. He gave a low sigh and fell silent for a long time. Then, without looking at Devyatkin, he asked in a dull voice:

"When are you going to town?"

"My mother said I can go on Sunday."

"No, tomorrow," Sanka doggedly announced. "I won't stop here another day. And if you won't come tomorrow, I will go by myself."

"Ha-ha, so they've got you on the runt" said Petka triumphantly. "Well, all right, we'll make it tomorrow. Let's go and tell my mother."

* * *

Preparations for the journey did not take long. Yevdokia assured the boys that Uncle Yakov would welcome them like a father and put them up for the first few days. Then he would find accommodation for them in a hostel.

Sanka packed in his haversack a loaf of bread, a few boiled potatoes, some underclothing and a towel. Then he rummaged in the plywood box in which his father's tools were kept. His father had been a handy man, he could re-sole boots, solder pots and mend pails; his box was full of all sorts of tools. Sanka took out a pair of cobbler's lasts, a hammer and an awl. You never knew, they might be useful in town, at the cobbler's shop.

What about his mother? Should he tell her now that he was going away to be a shoemaker? She would make such a fuss. Perhaps she would not let him go. It would be better for him to say he was going fishing with Petka on Dalneye Lake, and then write to her from town explaining everything.

He would have liked to say good-bye to Andrei Ivanich, Masha and Fedya, to explain to them. . . . After all, he hadn't meant his collective farm any harm. But would they believe him?

Fenya and his mother were not at home, nobody hindered his packing. Not till he was putting the hammer and lasts in his haversack did Nikitka come running in and ask, "Where are you going, Sanka?"

"Can't you see? To the lake. Fishing."

"But what's the hammer for?"

"What hammer? Oh, that . . . it'll do as a sinker."

"Eh?" Nikitka looked at him disbelievingly.

"Ask anybody you like. All the boys fish that way now."

"Will you bring a live fish back?"

"Yes, I'll bring two."

That quietened Nikitka, and he even volunteered to dig up worms.

So as not to see his mother, Sanka went to bed early, not forgetting to wind up his "alarm-clock."

Katerina came home late in the evening. She tried to get him up to give him some supper and to have a talk with him at the same time; but he pretended to be fast asleep.

His mother and Fenya both sat down to supper. They ate in silence. Only once did Sanka hear her answering some question of Fenya's:

"What is there to talk about, my girl; he's disgraced us Kon-shakovs."

Sanka winced and buried his head under the pillow.

Next morning, awakened by his "alarm-clock," he slipped unnoticed out of the house and ran to the Devyatkins'.

Yevdokia was stuffing Petka's rucksack with hot pancakes. When all was ready, she saw them off along the back lane to the edge of the village.

With sacks over their shoulders, and fishing-rods and tins of worms in their hands, they looked like regular anglers.

Bidding them good-bye, Yevdokia said that they would live in clover at Uncle Yakov's and come home for a visit in a year or two such fine lads that their friends would burst with envy.

"And you don't worry about your stepmother. I'll make her see reason," she promised Sanka. "She'll thank me yet for putting you on the right road."

Sedelnikova, the stable attendant, went by. She greeted Yevdokia and shot a glance at the boys.

"Off fishing, are you?"

"Not fish of old, but fish of gold," answered Yevdokia with a grin. Then she winked to the boys: "Well, away you go. Bring back a good catch."

The boys went to the main road. But they had not gone a hundred paces when Sanka turned off left, to the meadow where the horses were grazing.

"Where are you going to?" Petka asked in surprise.

"I must say good-bye to the horses; it may be the last time we'll see each other."

Petka did not object; they were well off for time.

"All right, go and kiss your Muromets good-bye!"

Sanka went up to the herd.

The horses were chewing the moist grass as rhythmically as children learning off a lesson.

Not far away, two buff-coloured foals, still unsteady on their long legs, were greedily taking suck from their mother.

Liska, aloof from the other horses as usual, was casting side glances at the field, wondering how she could edge nearer the corn.

Sanka looked for Muromets and patted his quivering, muscular neck. The horse, without turning away from the grass, lazily rolled a bright, lilac-coloured eye as much as to say: "Can't you see I'm having breakfast? Be so kind as not to disturb me."

But Sanka was not offended. Was it not on Muromets that he had had his first riding lessons? In those days he had sometimes fallen off in full gallop, and Muromets had stood waiting until Sanka recovered and climbed on his back again.

How many loads of hay, corn, and potatoes had Sanka and Muromets carted for the collective farm.

Sanka unfastened his haversack, broke off half the loaf of bread and placed it before Muromets.

Then Sanka wanted to go to the forge. Petka scowled and looked at the sun.

Dear old forge! How Sanka loved the sighs of your furnace, the clear ring of the hammers, the smell of coal and cinders, and old Yev-seich, whose whole life, it seemed, had been spent hammering on the anvil.

From the forge he went to the fields.

Petka was beside himself. "Trying to be funny, are you, Konshak? We'll be late for the train as it is."

But how could Sanka go away without a last look at the corn? There was his mother's field. The corn rose in a grey-blue wall. It covered the narrow footpath and Sanka cleaved the smoothness of the field, leaving a rippling wake that soon closed in behind him.

"Probably ten times as much, if not more," said Sanka, thinking of the harvest.

Suddenly he felt burning hot. What was he doing? If his father had been alive . . . if he had known. . . . The boy stood still, passing his fingers through the ears. Something rustled in the corn.

A little grey field-mouse was squatting on the ground, vigorously gnawing through a stalk of wheat. The stalk tilted, the mouse skilfully drew down the ear and started feasting on the grain. Sanka threw his fishing-rod at the mouse like a spear, but the mouse dived into its hole as though nothing worth speaking of had happened.

"The pest!" Sanka exclaimed in anger, and he started poking the soil with his rod.

"Protecting the harvest for the collective farm?" sneered Petka.

"Look how much corn it has ruined," Sanka exclaimed, nodding at the wheat.

Petka took a look at the heap of nibbled ears.

"Yes, pretty neat job. Neater than you and I did yesterday."

Sanka frowned. Yesterday. If only there had never been such a day. Why had they started that game of *lapta* anyhow!

Sanka picked up his rod and emerged from the wheat.

Now he was not stopping anywhere, not looking at anything.

CHAPTER 28

A FIGHT WITH PETUSHOK

Now only "Vekshin's outfit" was between them and the main road.

So as not to meet any of the children or Grandad Vekshin himself, Sanka turned off into the bushes bordering the plot.

The cows were grazing there.

Suddenly there was a crackling in the bushes as though the devil himself were rushing through them, and out on to the road came Petushok the bull, sleek and black as a crow's wing, with a white blaze on his forehead. In his nose was an iron ring; small crisp hairs curled over his forehead. Behind him came a few cows that had evidently strayed from the herd.

Devyatkin pulled Sanka behind a bush.

"Keep still. It's better not to cross a bull's path."

But Petushok did not notice the boys. With a dignified gait he went round the pond, which was covered with a woolly green blanket of duckweed, and approached the fence of the plot. Astonished that any-

body should dare to place barriers in his path, the bull leaned his massive forehead against the time-worn fence. The fence creaked and toppled over. Petushok jumped over it and, with a sidelong glance at the cows, uttered a long bellow as though inviting them all to enter the plot.

The cows—red, black, and buff—jumped awkwardly over the ruined fence and spread out among the beds. They crunched away at the green heads of cabbage, rooted up the tapering pink carrots, bit at the cucumbers, and sniffed mistrustfully at the tomatoes.

As became a hospitable host, Petushok did not touch anything himself, but strode with an air of importance over the beds, making his way deeper and deeper into the plot.

"I'll keep the cows back, you run for the cowherd. Quickly!" Sanka shouted, throwing off his haversack.

His eyes were narrow slits, his body was tense and poised slightly forward in the attitude he always adopted when about to rush into a fight or deal with some danger.

Petka grabbed his friend by the tunic.

"Where are you going? You know Petushok is there."

"What did I tell you!" Sanka shouted at him. "The cows will eat up the whole plot. Call the cowherd!"

But Petka held him fast by the shoulders and would not budge.

"You're out of your mind! He'll gore you! He'll toss you on his horns. Remember Grandad Vekshin . . . Petushok broke two of his ribs. Keep away, Sanka! It's time for us to go to the station."

Suddenly the boys heard a familiar voice.

"Hey, you demons! Hey, you gluttons! You just wait!"

Jumping over the beds and waving an empty watering-can, Masha came rushing from the far corner of the plot.

She plunged among the herd, but the cows took no notice of her.

Sanka broke out of Petka's grip and ran to help the girl. Masha shouted and drummed with her fist on the metal watering-can. Sanka gave piercing whistles, hallooed, and lashed the cows with his hazel fishing-rod until nothing was left of it but a stumped, splintered stick.

The cows, confused by such a determined onslaught, retired beyond the fence.

Suddenly a thunderous bellow deafened Masha and Sanka. They turned round. Petushok was advancing upon them. From his lips hung glassy foam, his eyes were like fire. His head was low and his nostrils, like bellows, were blowing up twin jets of dust from the ground. He seemed to be challenging the children to a trial of strength.

"Run quickly!" Masha shouted in terror.

But it was too late to run; the bull was only a few paces away. Sanka shielded the girl with his body, and, threatening Petushok with the stump of his fishing-rod, began a slow retreat.

Out of the bushes sprang Styopa and Fedya.

Masha ran as fast as she could across the plot, while the enormous Petushok advanced like a tank on Sanka. The boy backed away slowly, never taking his eyes off the bull, and threatening him with the stump of the fishing-rod. All the time he tried to coax the animal, his voice now stern, now imploring, as when one coaxes a vicious watch-dog:

"There, there, Petushok. Sh-sh-sh! Back! You dare!"

The chief thing, Sanka kept on repeating to himself, is not to take my eyes off him, not to run away. But Petushok, unmoved by Sanka's coaxing, continued his advance.

Sanka bent down, snatched a handful of earth and flung it in the bull's eyes. Then he sprang sharply aside and broke into a run. Petushok stopped for an instant, tossed his head, and suddenly rushed with surprising speed in pursuit.

"He'll kill him!" screamed Masha, clasping her head in her hands. Then, completely beside herself, she snatched from the fence a dry branch only fit for driving geese, and ran towards the bull.

"Stop!" Fedya overtook her and, shoving her aside, dashed ahead.

He ran as fast as his legs could carry him, but he did not know any more than Masha how he could halt the infuriated Petushok. Suddenly he stumbled over a large wicker basket, of the kind used in autumn to gather vegetables. He grabbed it and rushed at the bull. Styopa came hurrying from the other side dragging a long heavy pole.

But Petushok had eyes for no one but Sanka.

Sanka dodged and swerved, springing abruptly to left and to right, but Petushok, seizing an opportunity, caught him at last and tossed



him with such violence that the boy was hurled sideways and fell flat on the ground.

In the heat of the moment Sanka did not feel any pain; he sprang up nimbly and ran on, only to fall again after a few steps. Petushok, snorting and frothing at the mouth, bunched himself for another blow.

At that moment Fedya came up. With all his strength he flung the basket like a net over the bull's snout. Blinded, Petushok whirled round on the spot, shook his head and began furiously to gore the ground; but he was no longer dangerous.

Petka ran up with the cowherd. His long whip cracking like a gun, the cowherd drove the bull out of the plot.

CHAPTER 29

TO THE LIGHT

With great care, Masha, Fedya and Styopa took Sanka home. Devyatkin followed them carrying Sanka's haversack; he kept on saying how he had warned Sanka not to have anything to do with Petushok.

Katerina ran out to meet the children.

"My poor boy! Where did you get in such a state?" she cried, turning pale.

"It was the bull," Masha whispered.

Seeing his mother, Sanka attempted to smile.

"It was nothing. He only butted me once...."

Katerina undressed Sanka, bandaged the wound on his side and put him to bed.

"Auntie Katya, perhaps we should call the doctor?" Masha suggested.

"Yes, children, go as quickly as you can."

Masha and Fedya rushed off to the hospital in Torbeyevo. They soon returned with Ivan Yefimovich, the assistant surgeon, a wizened, spare-built elderly man.

Nearly all the Stozhari children came running to the Konshakovs. They peeped in through the window, and through the chinks in the passageway, and jostled one another in the porch.

"Now then, the first thing is don't make a noise," said Ivan Yefimovich. "Secondly, all go back two hundred paces. One, two...."

He waited until the children had gone as far as the middle of the street, by the logs, and then disappeared into the house.

"Masha," said little Timka Kolechkin, coming up to her all dishevelled. "Is it true Sanka has had an accident? Did you see it? Tell us!"

Masha related what had happened on the plot.

"There you are! I always said Sanka was not afraid of anything. He always stands up for others," Timka cried out with a look full of meaning at Devyatkin, who had just come up. Then he had a whispered talk with the children from the Big End, and they called Petka aside.

A long and heated discussion ensued.

Devyatkin only laughed at first. But the ring of children closed tighter and tighter round him. Timka shouted loudest of all. Unusually pugnacious and determined, he flew at Devyatkin like a young cock. Taciturn Vanya Strokin was also glowering at Devyatkin.

At last all the boys in the band went up to Masha, Fedya and Styopa.

"Listen," Timka stammered, "we want to tell you ... about Sanka. You think he trampled your wheat on purpose, out of spite, do you?..."

There's the one who caused it all." He nodded to Devyatkin. "Go on and tell them yourself now."

"Go on, Devyatkin," the other children seconded Timka, "you promised you would."

"Own up honestly."

"You're always hiding behind others' backs."

"Well, it was me," growled the snivelling Petka. "Yes, it was my fault."

Timka gave him a dig. "Tell them everything. We won't let you off, until you've told the truth."

"We were playing *lapta* yesterday," said Petka wretchedly, "and . . . well . . . Timka's ball fell in your plot."

"It didn't just fall in, you hit it in on purpose," Timka corrected him.

"All right then, I hit it in."

"And he was too scared to go and look for it. But Sanka wasn't, and he made Petka go with him. Well . . . that was how they trampled your wheat."

Fedya and Styopa glanced at each other. So that was it! And the ideas they had had the day before! Syomushkin had quite firmly maintained that Sanka had trampled their best wheat for revenge, and it must be admitted that the Vekshin brigade had nearly all agreed with him. Masha alone had stubbornly insisted that Sanka was "not that kind."

"Well, you're a fine lot!" Masha said accusingly to the Big End boys. "Fancy knowing and not saying anything about it till now!"

"We would have done," said Timka with a sigh, "but we couldn't find Devyatkin all morning. He had to own up to it himself."

Ivan Yefimovich came out of the cottage followed by Katerina. In the twinkling of an eye the children had surrounded them.

"Well then," said the doctor, taking leave of Katerina. "For the time being there is nothing to fear for your young toreador. Let us wait till tomorrow. If his temperature rises, bring him to hospital. Keep him in bed. No visitors, of course," and he cast an expressive glance at the children.

The children lingered a while near the cottage and then drifted away to their own homes.

But at dusk, Masha and Fedya came hurrying back to the Konshakovs', bringing with them fresh cucumbers and green apples. Tinka was already standing by the porch trying to persuade Katerina to accept a basket of wild raspberries for Sanka.

"He doesn't want anything at present. He's lying there groaning." Katerina waved them aside, and added reproachfully: "See what you've done now! Fancy teasing a bull."

"But we didn't tease him." And Masha related how it had all happened.

"So that's it. And I thought Sanka had been up to mischief again." Then she looked at Fedya: "And it was you that saved him? Thank you, Fedya. You and he will be like brothers now."

Fenya came running out. In her hands she had Sanka's haversack, the hammer and the pair of cobbler's lasts.

"Mum, what did Sanka have the hammer and these lasts with him for? Wasn't he going fishing? O-o-h!" she whispered, horrified, "I know—he wasn't going fishing, he was going to town, to be a shoemaker!"

For a long time Katerina held the hammer and lasts in her hands.

Had she then not taken care of the family as Yegor had instructed her to? Had she not inspired the boy with love for the earth, for the peasant's labour, for school?

She sighed. "Timka, was there talk among you about going to be shoemakers?"

"Well, there was," Timka admitted with downcast eyes, "only Mum wouldn't let me go."

Katerina's face clouded.

"My son doesn't care a pin for me. We sleep under the same roof, and that's about all."

"Auntie, dear!" Sympathy welled up in Masha. "Don't say that! Perhaps he was just frightened because of the wheat. But . . . but now we'll never let him leave us."

Katerina waved a weary hand.

"Run along home, all of you."

"We'll never let him leave us." Masha recalled her words, as she went down the street with Timka and Fedya. It was easily said, but how could it be done? There had been no getting near Sanka lately.

"Did you see the lasts?" Masha asked, stopping.

"He and Devyatkin had been thinking for a long time of going to be shoemakers. Yevdokia was always drumming it into their ears," Timka explained.

"How could he dare to leave the collective farm?" Masha burst out indignantly. "Everybody's working away here as hard as they can. And his mother does such a lot..."

"He just doesn't love his Stozhari," said Fedya, lost in thought. "If I were from your village..." He did not finish his thought but gazed for a long time down the street.

"Just think of it," Masha could not overcome her agitation. "When Uncle Yegor comes home he'll ask: 'Where's my Sanka? How's he getting on?'"

All of a sudden Timka uttered a strange sound as though something had stuck in his throat.

Masha turned round in astonishment.

"What's the matter, Timka?"

"Oh, you keep talking about everything. And you don't know a thing... you haven't got anything right! Just suppose... suppose Uncle Yegor doesn't come back?"

"What do you mean—doesn't come back?"

Then Timka remembered his vow and relapsed into silence.

But Masha and Fedya, feeling that something was wrong, gave him no respite.

A secret's a secret, Timka thought, but something must be done to help Sanka. And he told of Sanka's grief.

The children stood a long time in silence. Torn fleecy clouds stretched out over the sky. The old hollow lime-trees creaked anxiously in the wind. In the distance, behind the forest, blazed summer lightning. Lamps and burners were going on in the cottages. A light glowed in Andrei Ivanich's little window. How often already in their short life had the children gone to that light.

"Where are you going to, Masha?" inquired Timka, as the girl turned sharply.

"Home. Let's go to see Andrei Ivanich."

"But I gave Sanka my word..." Timka said anxiously. "Now the whole village will get to know..."

"You can tell Andrei Ivanich. He can be told anything."

CHAPTER 30

LATE AT NIGHT

Sanka was lying in the passage. The pain had relented somewhat. Only when he turned over or breathed deep did a sharp stabbing pain shoot up his left side, making it hard to breathe.

His mother, Fenya and Nikitka moved quietly about the passage. On the other side of the log wall children were whispering, and more than once Sanka noticed them inquisitively peeping through the chinks.

Then his mother had a long talk with the children in the porch. Sanka was unable to make out exactly what was said, but a few isolated words told him it was about him. It made him feel awkward and uneasy.

"That's a fine thing to be famous for—getting tossed by a bull," he thought, vexed with himself. He wanted to sleep. But his brain was clear and sleep would not come. The events of the past few days crowded into his mind: the game of *lapta*, the trampled wheat, the meeting, his mother's words "He's disgraced us Konshakovs."

"Is it true that all the wheat on your plot is ruined?" Sanka heard Timka asking. "Can't anything be done about it? Eh, Masha?"

"What can you do about it, if it is trampled?" Masha answered.

"Auntie Katya, don't you know anything?" Timka asked again. "Just so that they'll have no grudge against Sanka on the farm."

"Oh, children, I'm afraid you can do nothing for the corn. Unless perhaps you ask Andrei Ivanich or Grandad Vekshin. They might advise something."

Sanka covered himself up with the blanket.

"Just so that they'll have no grudge." He could not get those words of Timka's out of his head.

It grew dark. The children left the porch.

The village herd clumped heavily along the streets. The Konshakovs' cow burst noisily into the yard. Katerina went out to it with the milking pail, and, squatting on her heels by the heavy udder, she engaged in a long chat with the cow about whether she had had a good outing that day, whether the grass in the pastures was rich and the water in the pond tasty.

Sanka rose slightly from his bed, but the effort made him groan with pain. Then he realized he must dress without raising his left arm. Managing this with some difficulty, he went noiselessly out to the porch.

His legs carried him of their own accord to the teacher's house.

There was a light in the window.

Sanka's legs immediately grew heavy as though the road near the cottage were covered with quicksand. What was he going to say to Andrei Ivanich? How would he look him in the face? Would it not be better to turn back? All the same, Sanka mastered himself and entered the cottage. There he remained rooted to the spot.

Timka, Masha and Fedya were rummaging among the books on a bookshelf that stood in the light of the lamp. They looked in amazement at Sanka. Timka was the first to rush to him.

"What did you get up for? You've got to stay in bed."

"Where's Andrei Ivanich?" asked Sanka in confusion.

"He ... he's gone to your house to pay you a visit," answered Masha, and for some reason she exchanged glances with Fedya and Timka. "You probably missed each other. Sit down, Sanka, wait a little. Doesn't it hurt awfully?"

Fedya pushed a stool towards him.

Sanka sat down cautiously, looking askant at the children.

"Andrei Ivanich has found a little book for us," said Masha, "about wheat."

Sanka winced. "What about wheat?"

"Listen, I'll read it to you. It's very interesting." Fedya opened a thin booklet: "At the end of July there was a sudden hail shower and

our wheat was laid flat. What was to be done? We did not give in, and the whole brigade of us went out to the fields. It took us five days to raise the stalks of wheat which had been flattened to the ground and fix them with twine stretched on pegs over the field. Then we fed the wheat up and it soon recovered and started to grow."

"Who wrote that?"

"Some collective farmer . . . it's based on her own experience. Andrei Ivanich says we must do what she did. Perhaps our wheat will recover too."

"But we haven't got any twine," said Masha.

"That's nothing!" Sanka exclaimed, growing excited. "Timka and I have bark soaking in the pond. It can be plaited into good twine. Can't it, Timka?"

"Of course. And we can cut pegs in the woods."

"We'll start tomorrow then," Masha declared impatiently. But just then Andrei Ivanich appeared in the doorway.

"He's here, Katerina Vasilievna. Don't get alarmed," called the teacher, looking back.

"Oh what a fright you gave me!" Katerina ran into the room, clasping her hands. "Where have you been in that state?—I've searched half the village for you!"

"Andrei Ivanich!" Sanka said, rising to his feet. "Is it true that the corn can be saved? Just say so and I will do anything."

"Now, now, my little friend," the teacher interrupted. "Don't you bother about that for the time being. The children themselves will do all that is necessary. Go along home with your mother and go to bed. Being gored by a bull is no joke."

He saw Katerina and Sanka to the corner and then went back to the children.

When they got home, Katerina put Sanka in her own bed, gave him lime-blossom tea to drink, tucked the blanket round him and then started her usual task of clearing up the cottage. But everything seemed to slip out of her hands that day. She swept only half the floor and, leaving the broom in the middle of the room, started tidying some pots and pans by the stove.

"This is really too much for me," she thought. "No word for such a long time, not a single word from Yegor. Something must have happened to him. And now this trouble with Sanka. What if he's a cripple for life?"

Yevdokia Devyatkina came in. She stood by the dozing Sanka, heaved many long sighs, and then sat down by the table.

"He should have gone to town long ago," she said. "No bull would have got him there."

"So it's you that have been turning my boy's head?" asked Katerina in astonishment. "He won't stay at home now. . . . Thank you, my good neighbour."

"The lad isn't like you, he's easier to persuade. And he's got more sense too; he's beginning to see which side his bread is buttered. Don't you hold him back, Katerina. I judge by Petka. If they don't want to pore over books, it's no use forcing them to. Let them learn a useful trade. It's the best thing in times like these."

Yevdokia eyed the sunburnt Katerina. "You should think of yourself too. You've got yourself rooted to that field of yours, you've exhausted yourself. Why, you're as thin as a broomstick. They say you can't get rid of the weeds?"

"They're always catching up with me," Katerina complained. "No sooner do you get rid of one lot than there's another lot to deal with."

"That's it, you see. You waste a lot of strength, and what you get out of it will not feed your children."

"What are you leading up to?"

"To this: you ought to set out on another task with your family."

Katerina gave a start. "What's that you're saying! When Yegor has lived his whole life here, you want me to give it all up and wander off nobody knows where. What did Yegor say to me when he left? 'Katerina,' he said, 'two sins I will not forgive you: if you abandon the children, and if you turn away from the land.' No, indeed! How can you say such things!"

"Yegor Platonovich has no time to think of us now," Yevdokia sighed. "A war, I tell you, my dear, is not like Pushkin Collective Farm. It's pretty fierce. . . ."

Katerina tossed her head in dismay.

"Oh, how can you? Aren't I worried enough, as it is?"

After sitting a little longer, the neighbour left.

That night Katerina had a dream. A tall unshaven soldier in a stiff faded greatcoat came knocking sadly at the window, holding out a bundle of clothes and asking her to wash them.

"What can it mean?" wondered Katerina, awakening in a cold feverish sweat. Getting out of bed, she gazed for a long time at the dark street. She stood for a while over Sanka, touched his brow, and then lay down again. But sleep would not come.

"It's all Yevdokia's fault. It's the yarns she spun that have brought on this sleeplessness," Katerina thought with annoyance. Getting up, she wandered aimlessly about the cottage, not knowing how to while away the time till dawn. Then she decided to have a look at the children's clothes while they were asleep. She got together shirts, blouses, trousers, put a patch here, sewed on a button there. She came to Sanka's tunic. His breast pocket was torn and fastened with a pin. Katerina unfastened the pin, and out fell a note-book, some papers, a bit of a comb, and a small chipped pocket mirror.

"He's growing up, he's beginning to take care of his appearance,"



Katerina thought with a smile. She put the things together in a separate heap and neatly straightened out the papers. Among them was an envelope with a typed address: Pushkin Collective Farm, Konshakova Yekaterina Vasilievna.

Perplexed, Katerina turned the envelope over and over in her hands. It was soiled and tattered, and worn at the creases. With fingers that had suddenly grown ice-cold she took out a narrow slip of paper. She read through it. . . . The floor seemed to shake under her feet, the lamp swayed, and everything went misty. She sank heavily on to the bench, gripping the corner of the table. . . .

Sitting in the half-darkness, afraid to stir, she tried to gather her thoughts together. "What was it? What did it mean? What was she to do now? Was it really the end of everything?"

The death notification shone white in her hand. It burned her fingers. She looked at the paper again. There was the date, the month. So it had been a long time ago. . . . And she had known nothing about it. Sanka had kept it from her. But why? Katerina began to understand a great many things. So that was why her son had changed so much of late and become serious beyond his years.

Sanka suddenly stirred, feverishly waved his hand as though to keep somebody away, and muttered in a hoarse voice: "Sh-sh-sh, Petushok, sh-sh-sh! You dare!"

Katerina started up, hurriedly put the notification in the tunic pocket and went over to her son. He had got worse. His face was burning and he was breathing with difficulty. Wetting a towel with cold water, Katerina laid it on the boy's forehead, sat down by the head of the bed, and again reached out for the tunic. But just then Fenyà turned over in bed, and Nikitka, half asleep, half awake, asked for a drink. Katerina suddenly imagined the children waking all at once, seeing her face, understanding what had happened and starting to cry, with her crying too.

"No, no," she thought. "Can that help grief? Let everything go on for the time being as it is. The children must not know anything yet."

She put all Sanka's other things back in his tunic pocket and cautiously slipped the tunic into its old place—under Sanka's pillow.

Shedding a few bitter tears, she fixed her gaze on the boy's rough windbeaten face. "You poor thing!" she thought. "You poor little man! That's the end of your childhood. And you should still be running about and playing."

The day began to break. By force of habit, Katerina went out into the yard, milked the cow and, hearing the cowherd's horn, let her out into the street. Then, scarcely able to put one foot in front of the other, she wended her way to the stables for a cart to take Sanka to hospital.

CHAPTER 31 WE ARE NOT ORPHANS

A week later Sanka was discharged from hospital.

"Oh, Sanka, I've had such a terrible time," was all his mother could find to say. "Well, how are you now? Are you better? Walk up and down, let me see you."

Sanka crossed awkwardly from the window to the doorway. Then he looked intently at his mother. How she had changed in the past week or so. Her eyes were hollow, her back was stooped, and she had become dark and withered-looking like a gipsy.

"I'm not so sure which of us should have gone to hospital," Sanka said gloomily.

"You think I should? Whatever for?" his mother asked with feigned surprise. "I've just got a touch of the sun, that's all. The weather is so hot." And she started getting Sanka his breakfast.

Then she took a bag of the previous year's wild nuts out of the big chest and poured them in a heap on the table.

"Here, crack these. Take things easy for a bit."

And whispering some instructions to Fenya, she left for work.

Hardly had the gate banged to after Katerina, when Fenya started hopping round her brother, chattering all the time. Sanka was a wounded soldier in hospital and she was a nurse. The wounded soldier had to do everything she told him; he mustn't lift anything, he mustn't leave the house, he must be in bed all the time.

"I'll give you wounded soldier!" said Sanka indignantly. "I could fight you all with one hand." And seizing Fenya and Nikitka together he threw them both down on the bed.

Yevdokia dropped in. She questioned Sanka about his health and the hospital and twitted him about his desperate ways.

"The idea—fighting a bull! He might have gored you to death. My Petka was so terrified he's been talking in his sleep about bulls ever since. And why did you bother with Petushok anyhow? You should have gone your way with Petka." Then with a confiding wink she added: "And when are you going on that fishing trip now?"

Sanka pretended not to have heard.

Yevdokia peeped behind the calico curtains into the kitchen where Fenya was doing the housework, helped her to rake the coals in the stove and then, fumbling in her pockets, brought out a treacly pink sweet and thrust it into the girl's hand.

"Always alone, always by yourselves . . . you wretched little orphans. . ."

"We aren't orphans," said Fenya offensively. "We've got a mummy and daddy."

Yevdokia stroked Fenya's hair, shook her head and then, calling Sanka out into the passage, whispered to him:

"You hurry up and get better. That fish won't wait. I spoke to your stepmother. She's not keeping you back, you can go where you like."

"Did she say that?" asked Sanka, perplexed.

So his mother knew of his preparations and did not want to stop him.

But that news brought Sanka no relief.

"'Poor!' 'Wretched!'" Fenya mimicked Yevdokia when their neighbour had left. "We aren't wretched. Timka has his own mother, but look how hard she is on him. And our Mummy only pulled my ears once—when I dipped my finger in the cream. And it didn't hurt either. And she never pulls yours at all."

Fenya suddenly unclenched her little fist and put the sticky sweet on the table.

"There! I don't want it. Let the flies lick it." Then she looked sorrowfully at her brother. "But what's happened to Mummy? She goes about looking so tired. And she doesn't sleep at night."

"Perhaps it's all because of Dad."

"Of course it is. But it's because of you too."

"Because of me?"

"You don't know how upset she was when she unpacked your haversack. There were clothes in it, and a towel, and cobbler's lasts too.... Did you want to go away from us? Did you?"

"Where to? Petka and I were going fishing." Sanka bent low over the table-cloth, as though noticing for the first time how interesting the colours and designs were.

"Going fishing with lasts!" Fenya said with a sigh. "I've never heard of that before. Mummy guessed at once what your idea was. 'He doesn't care a pin for me'—that's what Mummy said about you. 'We live under the same roof, and that's about all.'"

"Not care a pin?" Sanka felt like bursting out, but there was so much reproach in Fenya's eyes that he bent still lower over the table.

"Our life," she said, "doesn't interest him either," Fenya continued. "'He never speaks to us like human beings, he just flings the words at you.' And you know how hard it is for Mummy all alone. Yesterday she came home from the fields, and when she sat down on the doorstep to take her boots off, she just fell asleep as she was. And it took me and Nikitka ages to wake her up!"

Fenya suddenly pressed close to her brother and whispered with heat: "You're just stupid, Sanka, that's what you are. Why, our Mummy is the best Mummy in the world."

Perhaps for the first time in his life, Sanka felt at a loss how to answer his little sister. He did not snort at her as he usually did, or make fun of her, but just withdrew his arm and went to the door in silence. Stopping in the doorway he asked in a low voice, without looking at her:

"How's the wheat on Vekshin's plot? Have you heard anything?"

"Masha said they began to raise it and then left off."

"Why?"

"Grandad wouldn't let them, she said."

"I knew they would fail," thought Sanka bitterly, and he went out into the street.

It had rained that morning and there was water in all the ditches and potholes.

Little boys were beating the puddles with long sticks and splashing water over one another.

Trying not to let them see him, Sanka plunged into his mother's vegetable garden and looked round.

The vegetable-store in the far corner of the garden had caved in and was overgrown with tall rose-bay in bloom, and young birch saplings; the fence was sagging; tall weeds and nettles were invading the beds.

Sanka got out the scythe and set to work. The nettles were tall, old and sinewy; when they were cut down they kept on reaching out to catch Sanka with their spiteful prickly leaves. But it seemed to the boy that, instead of a scythe, he held in his hands a wonderful magic sword, and that the nettles were a horde of vicious enemies whom he was fighting to the bitter end.

Presently Fenya peeped into the vegetable garden.

"Put that scythe away," she shouted, scampering up to her brother. "What did Mummy say? You're ill, bed's the place for you."

But Sanka swung the scythe so wide and vigorously that it was absolutely impossible to get near him.

"You've let the place run wild while I've been away," he grumbled. "It's a jungle, not a vegetable garden!"

Fenya shouted and fussed round him a little longer. Then she got a rake and started raking the nettles into the ditch near the fence.

Having done with the nettles, Sanka started to deal with the weeds.

Suddenly Fenya looked round and noticed Fedya and Masha. Leaning over the fence, they were staring into the garden as though something extraordinary were happening there.

Dolinka was behind Masha chewing the hem of her dress, but the girl did not notice her.

"Mowing for all he's worth," she whispered to Fedya. Then she climbed over the fence.

The rotten cross-piece gave way under her and Masha went flying into the ditch full of nettles.

Fenya laughed in her sleeve. But Masha sprang out of the ditch and, though she had been horribly stung by the nettles, burst out laughing too. Then she ran to Sanka and took hold of his hand.

"What, mowing already? And it doesn't hurt? So you can do anything now?"

"Anything I like," Sanka nodded. "I can mow hay tomorrow if you like."

"Fine, Sanka. And we were so afraid! Fedya, come here. What's the matter with you both? Call yourselves toreadors! Come on, shake hands."

The boys' eyes met. They went awkwardly up to each other and shook hands, firmly, like men.

Masha drew a deep breath.

"That's the way it should have been long ago."

Dolinka, as though guessing that there was complete peace and concord between the children, loped into the garden and started gambling round them.

Masha could not stand still either. The sting of the nettles was making itself felt. The girl hopped about on one foot, trying to rub one burning knee with the other.

"You ought to keep your legs covered," Sanka said, laughing. "Why don't you spit on where it itches, or rub it with earth?"

Then they all sat down under the poplar, and Sanka learned from Masha everything that had happened that week on the farm.

A lot had happened.

Andrei Ivanich was being appointed head master of the seven-year school. He and Tatyana Rodionovna had recently called a meeting of all the children who had left school, and told them to bring their mothers. It was a long meeting. Nearly all the mothers had agreed that the children should go back to school. Timka Kolechkin, Vanya Strokina and others were already going to the teachers for lessons. So was Fedya.

Sanka blinked with embarrassment. The boys going back to school! That was something new!

"You were good at Russian, Sanka," whispered Masha. "You could help Fedya, it's very hard for him."

"A lot of use I'd be. I've forgotten it all myself," answered Sanka, confused; and he asked her to go on with the news.

"Andrei Ivanich has been elected a member of the collective-farm management," Masha continued. "There was a meeting a few days ago. They spoke about Staraya Pustosh. And your mother read something out of a note-book that had a lot about Staraya Pustosh in it."

"That's Dad's note-book, I know," said Sanka. "What was decided?"

"To plough up the whole of Staraya Pustosh. Tatyana Rodionovna and the teacher have gone to the district centre with the plan."

"That's the stuff! That's the way Stozhari ought to do things!" Sanka said enthusiastically. He was longing to ask about the wheat on number five bed, but he did not dare.

Suddenly Fedya opened the subject himself.

"Do you want to look at number five bed?"

Sanka frowned. Fancy reminding him of something he wanted to forget for ever, like a bad dream?

He rose and picked up the scythe. No, the children would never forgive him for ruining that wheat. Neither would the grown-ups, neither would Andrei Ivanich.

"Why don't you say something?" Fedya asked. "Do you want to?"

"What is there to say? You didn't raise the wheat..."

"Oh, but he doesn't know!" Masha exclaimed, clasping hands. "It's as if he'd dropped from the moon." She dragged Sanka after her. "Come on, let's go to the plot. You'll see for yourself."

"But what about Grandad Vekshin...?"

Masha only waved her hand and laughed.

CHAPTER 32
"KONSHAKOVKA"

On the plot the children crowded noisily around Sanka.

"Feeling better, torcador?"

"How's the battle wound?"

"You've got fat on public grub."

"Wait a bit, lads, let him pay the wheat a visit first." Masha brushed the boys aside and led Sanka to number five bed. "Good morning, little ears! Good morning, little grains! Here's Sanka Konshakov. Tell him that you're hale and hearty."

At another time Sanka might have laughed at such talk, but in the circumstances he squatted down by the crop. Every trampled stalk of wheat had been raised from the ground and tied with bark-fibre to a thin switch. Here and there lay withered and wrinkled stalks. But there were not many like that. Most of the stalks were standing firm and well-rooted in the soil.

On the second half of the bed there were no switches at all, yet there, too, the wheat stood erect and strong as though it had never been flattened to the ground by Sanka's knees.

"What did you do, did you raise this or not?" Sanka asked in a low voice.

"We did a little, but then we left off," Fedya replied.

"Then why is it all standing straight?"

"Your father's the one to thank for that."

"Dad?" Sanka just could not understand.

"Yes. For growing such a kind." And Fedya told the story: "When you were taken to hospital, we all went to the plot. We got pegs ready. Timka and Vanya Strokin plaited twine out of bark-fibre. We started lifting each little trampled stalk and tying them to switches. We raised them. And we fed them up, and watered them. But do you know how many of them there are? We raised one thousand, then another thousand, then a third, but there seemed to be no end of them. We all got stiff backs. Syomushkin even fell ill. And the things we said about you! Your ears must have been burning all the time. On the third

morning we went out, and what did we see? The wheat was starting to straighten itself without any help. Grandad and the teacher were pleased as anything. 'No need for any more sticks,' they said. 'There's no flattening that wheat out. It's self-rising.' And true enough, on the fifth day it was all standing again."

"And do you know what name we've given it?" asked Masha.

"Self-rising?"

"No."

"Stozharovka?"

"Wrong again. Konshakovka!"

"Konshakovka!" Sanka gave a start.

"Now your father will never be forgotten," said Fedya softly.

Sanka bent low over the corn. He drew in the scent of the damp earth and the wheat stalks. His heart was bursting. Fine words of gratitude to his comrades rose in his mind, but he could not utter them. He just took out of his pocket a handful of nuts and shared them round.

"Take some," he said, "we've got plenty at home."

Syomushkin suddenly came running up. "Here's Grandad Vekshin. What about Sanka?"

"He's going to work with us," replied Masha. "We'll tell Grandad so. What do you say, boys?"

"That's a good idea," drawled Syomushkin vaguely. "But you know what Grandad Vekshin is. . . . He may. . . ."

They caught glimpses of Grandad's white shirt not far off.

"I'll keep out of sight," said Sanka, making for the bushes.

But it was already too late. Grandad Vekshin came up to the youngsters and sniffed the air.

"I know that smell, I'm sure. Well, you terror of fruits and cereals, come out into the light and give an account of yourself!"

Sanka came out from behind the bush, awkwardly pulling his tunic straight.

Masha ran up to Grandad and hung on to his arm.

"Grandad, dear! Haven't we told you everything already? Don't frighten Sanka."

"Here, who are you pleading for!" The old man waved her aside. "You can't frighten a lad who fought a bull single-handed. But as for questioning him—that I will indeed. Come here, Sanka." Twitching his shaggy eyebrows, Grandad gave the boy a piercing look. "What fish were you going to catch with those cobbler's lasts? Eh?"

Sanka remained silent.

"Aha! Nothing to say for yourself. So it was just a trick to leave our village. Took it into your head to try another kind of life, didn't you? Your father tended every field here, watered it with his sweat, set our collective farm on its feet, but all that's not to your liking. Well, let's suppose you leave, then Styopa leaves, then Alyosha, then Masha. . . . Who'll take the place of the old ones? Who will plough and grow wheat, who will care for the earth? The earth does not take to anybody, you know. It needs hard-working, painstaking people, old hands at the job. . ." Grandad shaded his eyes with his hand and looked at the sky. "Look there and take notice. A cloud has gathered over the grove. It means nothing to you, but I can feel it's going to bring us rain. Good fine rain. Rain like that is more precious than gold. It makes all our riches grow. See, where our wheat is growing fat ears, where the dolgunetz flax is rearing its head, where the oats are shooting stalks. That's where those block-head nazis trampled everything to the ground, defiled everything; but only two years later, what wealth we have managed to grow! And you just wait, our soldiers will come home, and what blessings will it give us then! What a wonderful thing our earth is! No man worthy of the name has any reason for turning away from it."

Sanka was looking down at his feet.

"I won't say a word to you about the wheat," Grandad went on. "While you were in hospital, the children made up for that little sin of yours. And our wheat itself has shown what it's worth, thanks to Yegor Platonovich." He took a pear out of the folds of his shirt and offered it to Sanka: "Taste that. . . . To peace and concord, so to speak."

Sanka took the pear cautiously and put it in his pocket. "Thank you, Grandad."

"Eat it here before me, in my presence. And give me back the pips. See you don't swallow any by accident, and don't damage them with your teeth."

"Don't argue," whispered Masha. "He treats everybody like that."

Sanka ate the pear quickly and let the brown, slippery pips fall into Grandad Vekshin's hand.

"Well, what was it like?"

"Jolly good!"

"That's fine!" Grandad Vekshin said with satisfaction. "I shall wait until you treat me to pears like that."

Then he remembered that other matters claimed his attention, and away he went.

Fedya and Masha showed Sanka round the plot, explaining what crops they had sown and where; what each was remarkable for, and where they had got the seeds from. Sanka listened in attentive silence. Once he stopped by a bed of green peas heavily laden with bulging pods.

"They are Otradny," Fedya explained. "We got them off a brigade loader at Loktevo. They have a very high yield and aren't afraid of drought."

"They're as sweet as sugar. Try them," whispered Masha.

"Of course, pick some. One pod won't matter," said Fedya.

"Why pick them though, if they are for experiment..." And Sanka would not touch a single pod.

CHAPTER 33

THOUGHTS AND DREAMS

Andrei Ivanich appeared on the plot. The children ran to meet him.

"Ah, Sanka!" said the schoolmaster, noticing the boy. "So you are back? How are you feeling?"

"I'm all right, Andrei Ivanich."

"That's good. It's no time to be ill now. I have some pleasant news from the district. Where is Zakhar Mitrich? Call him here, children."

But Grandad Vekshin was already hurrying to the teacher.

Andrei Ivanich held out a newspaper to him: "Read what they write about Stozhari, Zakhar Mitrich."

Sanka peeped over Grandad's shoulder.

The district newspaper *Lenin's Path* warmly supported the patriotic undertaking of the Stozhari collective farm to plough up the whole of Staraya Pustosh and increase the area under corn. It called on the other collective farms to follow the example of the Stozhari people in order to give the country more wheat. The paper told in detail about Katerina Konshakova's brigade, which was already showing in practice what rich corn could be grown on abandoned land.

"So we're coming out among the leaders," said Grandad delightedly. "We have stirred up the whole district."

"I'll tell you something else that'll make you glad, Zakhar Mitrich," said the teacher. "I showed the district people our 'Konshakovka.' They were very interested in it. By the look of things, we shall have to develop this variety not only for ourselves, but for the whole region."

"That's what Stozhari should have been doing a long time ago!" Grandad exclaimed. He glanced at the children and then at the strawberry bed. "Why don't you gather the strawberries? They'll be getting over-ripe. You know what to do with them. And it wouldn't cause any harm to treat Andrei Ivanich to a few."

"I'll go and tell the news to Katerina Vasilievna," said the schoolmaster, and he called Sanka.

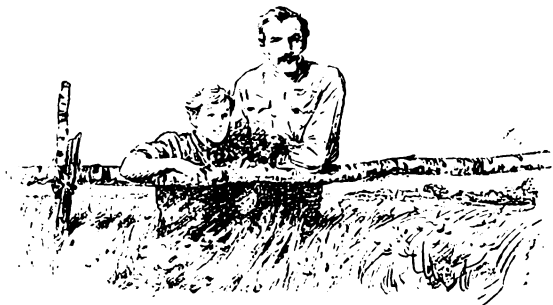
They set out for the fields.

Andrei Ivanich glanced about him thoughtfully and then stopped.

"Look ahead, Sanka, towards Staraya Pustosh. Imagine it in a few years. There's a great wall of corn in front of you, tall and thick, and with such wonderful ears that all passers-by stop and ask: What is that wonderful wheat? 'That's Konshakovka', we answer; and then we tell them how that wheat come to be there, and where it came from. Can you imagine that, Sanka?"

"Yes, Andrei Ivanich, I can," the boy whispered.

"And now look on this side." The teacher pointed to the village with its motley assortment of thatched and shingled cottages, and low-built mud huts overgrown with turf. There our Stozhari spreads



out. New houses with large windows, electric light everywhere, gardens all around, paved streets. On the hillock—the club, the theatre; there the post-office, the wireless relay station. And in that village lives Sanka Konshakov, an expert on high yields, a brigade leader, or an agro-technician, just as he thinks best. Though he has no beard yet, he is respected in the village. The old men shake hands with him. Learned scientists come from town to see him. Accounts of his work are broadcast to the whole country by wireless."

"What are you saying, Andrei Ivanich?" The boy murmured in confusion. "You are placing me very high."

"Don't you want to rise high? Would you rather aim lower?" The teacher looked intently at Sanka. "Look at your mother, she is starting something big, she is not afraid. What are you thinking of going in for?"

Sanka cast down his eyes and, taking off his cap, rubbed the red enamel star for a long time with his sleeve.

"You've not made up your mind yet? But I have found work for you."

"You have?"

"The most urgent for the present. You'll go to school. In the seventh class."

"Andrei Ivanich!" Sanka gasped.

The teacher laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Keep calm, Sanka. I know of your grief. Your friends told me everything. . . ."

"Timka?"

"Yes, Masha and Fedya know too. But don't you get angry with them. They could not do otherwise. I understand now why you left school: you wanted to help your mother. But it turned out just the opposite. You hurt her. She wants everything to be just as it was in Yegor Platonovich's time. She does not want anybody to forget his thoughts and dreams. And she wants you, too, to be just as you were when your father was here: a loving son, a good pupil at school, and the first man in the village in the future. But you seem to have put yourself out of the running, you've left school. . . ."

"Andrei Ivanich," he confessed, "I can't get on in mathematics."

"I know, you neglected it. There was nobody to check you. But that's a thing we can put right. Fedya Cherkashin has been through more than you, but he does not forget school. I know you, Sanka. If you make up your mind to it, you'll catch up. Nadezhda Petrovna is now looking after those who are backward in mathematics. You go to her too. And, if necessary, I shall help you as well."

The teacher noticed Katerina Konshakova coming up the path and went to meet her. Sanka was left alone.

Slow blue-grey waves rippled in endless succession over the cornfield. In the distance sky-blue patches of oats alternated with green potato. Bearded ears of wheat, hanging over the path, tickled Sanka's hands; faded grasses were shedding seeds on the ground.

The sun lay behind a fluffy white cloud, its rays piercing the cloud like arrows.

Here it was, his dear native land. His father had lived here; here his mother laboured. Could any place be dearer to Sanka than this!

A bird--was it a kite or a hawk?--soared high in the sky. For a long time Sanka followed its powerful flight.

Sanka came to the high bank of the river. A solid wave of wind struck him in the chest and made him stagger back, surrounding him with the mingled scent of hay, river sedge and milk fresh from the cow.

The boy felt a sudden desire to test his strength against the wind and the river, and against something else, he knew not what. He picked up a flat smooth stone, took a run and, with a skill to be found only in boys, hurled the stone in the teeth of the wind. The stone described an arc and fell on the other side of the river.

Masha and Fedya were standing by a dark, motionless creek, reaching for yellow and white water lilies.

The surface of the water was all rippling in little circles. Now a dragon-fly would strike it with its wing, now a young fish would dart past, now a seed would drop from a tree.

Sanka jumped down from the bluff, bringing a shower of loose sand in his wake, and ran to the water's edge.

"Shall I get some flowers for you?" he shouted.

"Yes, as many as you can, Sanka," Masha answered gladly, knowing that nobody was so skillful as he at getting water lilies out of the deepest backwaters.

Sanka cut a stick as long as a fishing-rod and split the end of it. Then he plunged the stick in the dark waters, seized the stem of a lily in the split, drew it aside, and nipped it; the white flower, like a small pretty roach, fell in the grass. Then a second, then a third. After the white ones came yellow ones. Masha could hardly manage to pick up the flowers.

"Enough, enough! What am I going to do with so many? I shan't be able to carry them!" she cried.

At last, with a skilful lunge, Sanka plucked the last yellow water lily.

"Oh, how greedy you are, Sanka! You always want so many!" Masha scolded him, hiding her face in the moist cooling tissue of the fresh flowers.

Sanka went up to Fedya and asked quietly: "How are you getting on with your Russian?"

"Not bad ... but the suffixes are holding me up a bit."

"If you need any help, just ask me, don't be shy. I'll tell you what I remember."

Nikitka appeared on the bluff. He slithered down the loose sand as if he were tobogganing.

"Sanka! There's a whole swarm of bees on our house!" he reported with as much pride as if the swarm were already in the hive.

Sanka jumped up. A swarm of bees! That was luck!

"Has it been there long?"

"Rather. I've been searching for you everywhere. . . ."

"Let's go then!"

"But can you capture a swarm?" Masha asked him.

"I have done. My Dad used to catch a lot."

"Perhaps we should call Grandad?"

"No. We've got to get there in time. A swarm doesn't wait. It may fly away any minute."

"Then we'll come too!" And Masha and Fedya ran after the two brothers.

On the way, Nikitka kept making plans for spending the money they would get from the sale of the swarm. The first thing would be to get his top boots re-welted; then they would buy Fenya a new kerchief; and if there was enough money left, they would buy Sanka a broad soldier's belt with a heavy shiny buckle instead of the plain strip of raw-hide which did not at all match his forage cap and tunic.

The Konshakovs' cottage came into view. Walking up and down in front of it, like a sentry, was Fenya.

His heart thumping, Sanka stood by his sister and looked up. On the plank frontage of the cottage, in the corner under the wooden edge of the thatched roof, he saw a dark, seething mass.

Leaving Nikitka, who had just come running up, to mount guard over the swarm, as though he could prevent it from flying away, Sanka rushed into the cottage. He ordered Masha to look in the passage for an empty basket, Fedya to wet a broom, his small sister to get a needle and thread ready.

He himself looked for an old sieve, took out the rusty wire netting and got a sack, the bottom of which he cut out, sewing on the netting in its place.

Then he drew the sack over his head so that the netting was in front of his face, put on his mother's wadded jacket, a pair of mittens, and felt boots.

"Will you help?" he asked Fedya.

Fedya nodded.

"Get dressed then."

The combined efforts of the two girls found a rig-out for Fedya too.

As there was no other sieve in the house, they wrapped Fedya's head in a woollen shawl.

The boys went out, looking baggy and awkward.

Sanka ordered Fenyä, Masha and Nikitka to stand well clear of the house—who could tell what might happen? He had, indeed, seen his father capturing swarms more than once, but his share, to tell the truth, had consisted only in handing his father the wet broom and pail.

The girls obediently went some distance away, and Nikitka hid in a niche between stacks of firewood.

Setting a ladder against the cottage, Sanka started to climb up, rung by rung. Fedya stood below with the pail of water, the birch broom and the empty basket.

Sanka stepped on to the top rung of the ladder. There he could reach the swarm with his hand.

The swarm buzzed angrily, as though displeased at having to stay so long on the Konshakovs' cottage. Little black sparks flew from it, circled in the air and then rejoined the dark living cluster.

"The broom!" Sanka whispered.

Fedya dipped the broom in the pail of water and, climbing quickly up the ladder, passed it to Sanka. Holding on to the corner of the cottage with one hand, Sanka started to sprinkle the bees with water.

The buzzing died down. The bees' wings were wet and they could no longer take flight. Fedya passed the empty basket up to Sanka, who started to sweep the bees out of the corner into the basket.

But, as it turned out, not all the swarm had been calmed by the wet broom. A number of bees, flying out of the basket, circled round Sanka's head, and one or two even found their way through the netting.

Sanka uttered a muffled cry, shook his head, and struck his temple and then his neck through the netting.

"Sprinkle them, sprinkle them again!" Fedya advised sympathetically from below, sticking his nose out of the shawl, and in the same instant crying out from the sting of a bee.

At last Sanka had raked all the bees out of the corner. He covered the basket with a piece of sacking and quickly descended the ladder.

Brandishing the wet broom, he sprinkled water all around to chase away the bees which still remained free, and laughed with relief.

"You're all caught, little bees! You won't get away now. . . . All clear, Fedya!"

The boys took off their masks.

Fenya, Masha and Nikitka came nearer.

Masha looked at the boys and burst out laughing: Sanka's eye was swollen and so was Fedya's nose.

"What a pair of beauties! Does it hurt? Did they sting you much?"

Nikitka put his ear to the basket and whispered with delight: "They're buzzing! Come and listen."

Masha also bent down over the basket and, unable to restrain herself, even lifted a tiny corner of the sacking, but quickly dropped it again.

"What a swarm you've caught, over four pounds, I should think. Enough for a whole hive. If only Grandad had one like that! He says that bees are like corn: out of a single swarm you can breed a whole apiary." She turned to Sanka, "Who are you thinking of selling it to? Loktevo? Or are you going to take it to town? D'you know what, Sanka? We'll buy it from you. We'll collect money from all the children to buy it. And we'll present it to Grandad Vekshin. He'll be so glad! And wait, in a year or two Stozhari will have its own apiary, no worse than the one on the Loktevo Collective Farm."

"Drop that about money," Sanka said with a frown. He suddenly picked up the basket with the bees in and thrust it into the girl's hand. "There, take it. Take it to Grandad."

Masha exchanged glances with Fedya, and noticing the disappointment in the eyes of Nikitka, who had almost reached out for the basket, she set the bees down on the ground again.

"No, no, it's your swarm. You must sell it. You need new things."

"Take it, I tell you!" Sanka shouted. "Do you think I'm a miser, or a Petka Devyatkin? Sell it to my own collective farm!" And seeing Masha still hesitate, he got really angry: "If you don't want to, I'll give it to him myself."

Considering there was nothing more to say, he beckoned Nikitka to him and went into the cottage.

"And don't you pout, Nikitka. As if there weren't enough bees on earth! Another swarm will come. Then I'll get it for you. You just be on the look-out."

"But I don't mind," his little brother sighed. "Another one's sure to come. I'll keep a good look-out."

CHAPTER 34

TOGETHER AGAIN

Sanka observed his mother very closely. In the morning she no longer hurried out when it was hardly light to get together the members of her team, as she used to do. Instead she would fuss for a long time round the stove or wander aimlessly about the cottage.

Quite often she would come back from work before the break and lie down on the bed without undressing.

The neighbour would look in, tidy up the cottage and wash the dishes. She kept advising Katerina to drink a brew made of herbs that was supposed to cure all diseases in a flash.

"I'll get better without that," Katerina would answer apathetically. "I must have taken a chill, lying on the damp earth."

Sanka wondered how one could catch a chill at this time of the year. It was dry and hot in the daytime, and even in the evening the earth did not lose its heat.

Late one evening Sanka was wakened by Yevdokia's sing-song voice. In the quivering flame of the oil-lamp he could see his mother was in bed, huddling under her blanket. The neighbour was sitting at the foot of the bed, complaining of Tatyana Rodionovna.

"The chairwoman called me to the office yesterday and said: 'You are strong, Devyatkina, go and work in the fields. We'll appoint somebody else to take the milk out!' Me strong! Field work just breaks my back, my heart can't stand it. The others are always painting me black out of envy. They're saying I do some shady business on my own at the market. But what's the harm in a bit of honest trade? How

can people with poor health like mine stay in a collective farm! A few days ago I was in town, at my brother Yakov's. He wants me to go to the artel with him. Says he'll fix me up as storewoman. Let's go together, Katya dearie. We'll find work for you too."

Sanka became all ears.

What was that? Yevdokia was trying to talk his mother into leaving Stozhari, and she was listening submissively to her, not saying a word.

"It will be better for the children too," Yevdokia went on. "We'll make cobblers out of Sanka and Petka; they've been wanting to do that for a long time."

Sanka tossed restlessly in bed. Then he got up and padded about the cottage barefoot. Going over to the drinking pail, he scooped up a mug of water and, although he was not at all thirsty, drank it slowly in little mouthfuls.

"What are you doing up in the middle of the night?" Yevdokia asked him.

"I was asleep and you wakened me up..." Sanka raised the oil-lamp above his head, shone it on the clock and pulled up the weights. "The cocks will soon be crowing..." he said, casting an unfriendly side-glance at the neighbour.

"So they will, it's quite late," she said, rising. "Well, think it over, Katya dear. It's for your own good, you're not a stranger to me."

Sanka saw her out, locked the gate, and going in again, sat down by his mother.

"What secrets have you and Yevdokia got. Why does she come to see you so often?"

"I'm shivering, Sanka. Cover me with something."

Sanka tucked his mother in a sheepskin.

"That Devyatkina will be luring her away, turning her head," he thought in alarm, going back to bed; he suddenly had a vision of his mother loading their chatt'les on a cart, boarding up the windows, padlocking the gate, and the whole family leaving Stozhari.

"I won't let that woman into the house," he thought in a fit of daring. "I'll saw under the porch steps, so that she'll break her legs."

Next day Katerina tried to get up but could not.

She was running a high temperature. At night she became delirious and called for Yegor, now imploring him to come back, now bidding him farewell.

Sanka did not sleep a wink till dawn. He wandered anxiously about the cottage, offering his mother pickled cranberries and kvass.

The fever abated towards morning, and Katerina sent her son next door to ask Yevdokia to milk the cow and light the stove.

"We can do without Yevdokia," Sanka declared. "I'll manage myself."

Taking the milk pail, he went out into the yard with Fenya.

Lying in bed his mother could hear through the half-open door how long they fussed about trying to milk the cow, how Sanka, in endearing tones, called her a beauty and a smart little cow, how he flattered her dung-crust-ed legs with the name of "leggies," and then, seeing that he could not manage her, shouted at her and called her a good-for-nothing that should have been sent to the slaughter-house long ago.

Then Masha came and scolded him for not calling her before. If there was anything she could do better than the boys, it was milking cows.

Fedya and Timka dropped in too, and all the children together started on the house-work. They fetched in wood and water, lit the fire, and then started a whispered but violent argument as to whether it was too early to put the potatoes on. At last they knocked something over—a pot full of water, it appeared, for the wood in the stove started hissing angrily.

"You are a fine lot of cooks, you are!" Katerina called, rising on her elbow. "Run off home."

But she was glad at heart that the children showed so much sympathy for her, and friendship for Sanka.

Then came Lena Odintsova. She very reasonably declared that there was nothing for the boys to do round the stove and sent them for the doctor, while she and Masha looked after the house-work.

Presently the doctor arrived. He said she had pneumonia, wrote out a prescription, and gave her strict instructions not to leave her bed.

When the doctor had gone, Katerina grew drowsy and soon fell asleep.

Again she talked in her sleep, and Sanka did not leave her a single minute.

It was dusk when she awoke, and at first she could not make out her son. He was sitting at her feet, twisting the edge of the blanket. Tears were running down his cheeks.

"Silly boy, getting frightened," said his mother with a weak smile, and freeing her hand out of the blanket she stretched it out towards Sanka.

But he got off the bed clumsily and went to the window.

"You lie down," he said.

There was a knock at the gate; Sanka went out and came face to face with Yevdokia.

"What's the matter with your stepmother, Sanka? They say she's fallen ill? I've brought her some jelly."

"No need for it," said Sanka, not very politely, trying to close the gate. "The doctor said she was not to be disturbed."

"I'll not disturb her, my little orphan," Yevdokia said, somewhat taken aback.

"What's the idea of calling us orphans all the time?" Sanka said glowering. "Don't call me that any more. Or Fenya either. We won't have it!"

"Pray, what do you wish me to call you?"

"Anything you like. . . . And leave my mother alone!"

"What a way to speak to people!" said the offended Yevdokia.

"It's the way anyone would speak. Why are you trying to lure her nobody knows where? If you don't like it in the collective farm, you can go away. But we have no reason to leave Stozhari."

Yevdokia blinked her dim-sighted eyes.

"So that's the kind you are, Konshakov."

"Yes it is. And if you come worrying my mother any more, I'll complain to Tatyana Rodionovna."

Sanka closed the gate and bolted it.

But that evening, when there was nobody in, the neighbour came to see Katerina as though nothing had happened.

Sanka did not know what to do. Meeting Fedya and Masha, he complained of Yevdokia to them.

"What a plague that woman is!" said Masha indignantly. "You just go and tell Tatyana Rodionovna. She will give her a talking to. She can even call her before the board."

"That's no good," replied Sanka embarrassed. "What will people think! See, what a family those Konshakovs are! First the youngster wanted to break away from the farm, now the mother."

"Yes, I suppose they might," the girl agreed. "You keep an eye on that woman, Sanka; take care of your mother."

"I'm doing that. . . . And if you notice anything, let me know."

"I will that," Masha said with a nod.

But it was difficult to keep watch on Yevdokia.

When Sanka was at work in the stables one day, Masha came running to tell him that Yevdokia was again at their house. Sanka ran home.

In the vegetable garden, Fenya was plucking off the cabbages' sprawling blue leaves.

"What did I tell you!" said Sanka angrily. "If you go out, lock the gate. And now you've gone and let Yevdokia in again!"

"Sanka, I did lock it. It's just like that woman. She must have got in through the yard."

Sanka went through the dark passage that smelt of birch brooms, and fumbled for the catch on the door. But at that moment the door burst open, and Yevdokia nearly knocked him down as she rushed out. Then she turned round, spat three times on the threshold and ran away mumbling something.

"What's been going on here?" asked Sanka guardedly as he entered. "What did she come for?"

"You had better not ask," replied his mother, vexed and waving him aside. She pulled the blanket over herself. Her hands were trembling, red patches stood out on her cheeks.

"Has she been trying to lure you away somewhere again?"

"Yes. And she kept asking about you—when you are going to be a cobbler. Her Petka is still waiting for you."

Sanka flushed. Suspecting that his mother was not telling him everything, he burst out passionately:

"I'm not going to be a cobbler at all! Do you hear? And I won't let the house be boarded up."

"What are you talking about? Which house?"

"You know which. Ours, the Konshakovs! Why do you listen to everything Devyatkina says? You've got very meek and mild, haven't you? I'll write a letter about it. . . ."

"A letter? Who to?"

"There's somebody I can write to. There's Dad, for instance. What about him, fighting out there with bullets and shells all round? Why he might get killed any minute. And you. . . ."

Katerina raised her head and looked entreatingly at her son.

"What are you saying that for, Sanka? It hurts me so. You see, I know all about it. I read that paper you carry in your pocket."

"You know? How?" Sanka gasped and put his hand to his tunic pocket.

For a long time they were silent, each engrossed in his own thoughts. Then, turning his face aside, Sanka asked in a hollow voice:

"So now there's nobody to keep you back. . . . That means you're sure to go?"

"What are you saying?" asked Katerina in astonishment. "Where shall I go to? Do you think I'm like Yevdokia? She's been looking for an easy life ever since she's been here. What's the collective farm to her? It's just somewhere to put her up. Why, it never entered my head to leave Stozhari for any other place, or to forget your father's work. There's no better place than ours in the whole world! Every birch-tree, every bit of land here is dear to me. Only it was so hard when I got to know about that notification. Everything started to go round and round. And then that Yevdokia with her nagging. Making out my whole life had been a failure, and running down our collective farm. That was the last straw for me. . . . Well, today I gave her a piece of my mind."

"Steady on," Sanka interrupted her. "So it was you turned her out? You showed her the door? And here's me wondering why she spat all over our doorstep!"

"Well, I didn't take her by the scruff of the neck. But she'll forget the way to our house for a long time now."

"And good riddance too," Sanka exclaimed. "Why, I've been fighting and struggling against her. . . ."

"I know," his mother smiled. "She had something to say about you, did our neighbour. You're not respectful towards her. You were afraid for me, were you? Well, thank you, dear." She gave her son a searching glance. "But what about you, you aren't thinking of breaking away again, are you? Now that we have no father, you and I must stick together."

"I won't break away now." Sanka looked aside in confusion. "It was just a mistake that time."

Katerina beckoned her son towards her and asked in a quiet voice:

"And now, Sanka, where does your road lie? It's time for you to join the Young Communist League."

Sanka heaved a faint sigh. What could he say? It was a long time since he had written his application for admission to the League. He had thought it would all be so simple. At the meeting he would tell how he worked, how many work-day units he had in his book, and they would all immediately raise their hands in his favour.

But Lena had not even accepted his application. "Before you go back to school," she had said, "we will not even consider your application." So Sanka had been carrying his application in his pocket ever since.

Petka Devyatkin stuck his head in at the window.

"What do you want, Petka?" asked Katerina.

"Mother said will you give us the milk pail back. You've kept it for two weeks as it is."

"Give him it, Sanka," Katerina nodded. "It's in the passage."

"You want a complete break then," snorted Sanka.

"Yes, complete," his mother said with a laugh. "There's a poker by the stove too, and a pot with a crack in it. Give it all back."

Sanka carried the things outside and handed them to Petka.

"By the way, Konshak," Petka said, "I'm asking you for the last time: Must I wait for you to come and be a cobbler with me, or not?"

"And I'm answering you for the last time," Sanka grinned. "You've got a long wait coming."

CHAPTER 35

RECONNAISSANCE REPORT

In the morning Sanka went to the experimental plot. He now went there nearly every day to help the children weed, hoe and water. But that was not enough for him, he was always finding something else to do. He mended the gardening tools, he sharpened the spades, he put up a new gate.

"Anything else needed, Zakhar Mitrich?" he asked Grandad Vekshin. "Just you tell me..."

"You seem to have done everything."

"Do the *susliks* bother you? I can make traps."

"We've got a stock of them. Alyosha took care of that before you came," the old man answered. Noticing how often the boy glanced at the "Konshakovka," he smiled: "My word! That wheat has cast a spell on him. What a good boy he is now!"

In the midday heat, when work on the plot was interrupted, Sanka and Fedya would find a spot in the shade and open their books.

True, they didn't study very hard. A green horned caterpillar would sometimes fall from a tree on to their book, a fussy red ant



would scamper over their hands, the pungent smell of sun-heated grass would tickle their nostrils.

"Fedya, what's the name of this plant?" Sanka would ask, looking up from his book; for him one plant was very much like another.

Fedya always found an answer. As a good scholar understands books, so did he know all about trees, birds and insects. He knew the names and the peculiarities of most inconspicuous little plants, which Sanka had formerly not even noticed. Fox-glove, for example, was used to make drops for heart disease. Infusions of shepherd's purse stopped bleeding; and Solomon's Seal was a good cure for rheumatism.

"Why you're a regular herbalist!" Sanka would say, full of admiration.

"That's nothing," Fedya would answer. "Take Grandad. The way he understands nature makes you envious." Then he would suddenly remember their work. "Look, we are going to get stuck with our problem again. Let's not look up from our book."

That day Sanka came to the plot with a face so radiant that Masha asked him: "What are you so joyful about?"

"Just imagine! Yesterday we racked and racked our brains over a problem and just couldn't work it out. Even Styopa got stuck on it. And this morning I just sat down and solved the whole thing. Where's Fedya?"

"He's not here, Sanka. He's gone away."

"Where's he gone to?"

"He didn't tell anybody. He got ready yesterday evening and went. Grandad is so sad, won't say a word."

"Is it true that the nazis threw Fedya's mother into burning corn?" Sanka asked after a silence.

Masha cast down her head:

"Yes."

"And hasn't he any relations left at all?"

"Fedya told me he used to have an auntie. But nobody knows where she is now. Perhaps Fedya's gone to the state farm, to look for somebody," Masha said thoughtfully.

"Who should he look for?"

"I don't know, Sanka," the girl admitted, perplexed.

Work on the plot did not go well that day. Grandad Vekshin did not put in an appearance. Masha and Sanka were very quiet. Every now and then they would run out to the road and wait to see whether Fedya was coming.

When Sanka got home, Katerina at once noticed his anxiety.

"Not been able to get on with somebody again?"

"No, it's not that," Sanka said, turning away to the window. "Fedya Cherkashin has gone away without a word to anybody."

Outside the window a slender young birch seemed to bow to somebody in the wind, the sun shining through its light apparel. Next to the birch, touching it with its branches, stood a young mountain ash.

"Mum!" Sanka suddenly went up to his mother and whispered excitedly: "If only Fedya comes back, let's ask him to come and live with us. Shall we, Mum?"

Katerina gazed intently at the boy and smiled. "Yes, we will, Sanka. If only he comes back."

... Masha was not mistaken: Fedya had indeed gone to Visokoye State Farm. But it would have been better for him had he not gone. He did not find his little white house, and the people on the state farm were all new and quite strangers to him. Nobody recognized Fedya.

He returned to Stozhari in the evening. The first on the plot to notice him was Sanka. He called Masha, and they both ran to meet Fedya. Suddenly Sanka stopped.

"D'you know what, Masha? Let's not ask him about anything."

"Yes, perhaps that'd be better," the girl agreed, and they retraced their steps.

When the children came to the plot next day, Fedya was already there. He was squatting on his haunches near number five bed taking something off the stalks of wheat. From a distance it looked as if he were gathering berries.

"Come here, chaps," he shouted. "Look what I've found!"

They all ran to Fedya. He held out a tin to them. On the bottom of it crawled some ugly grey beetles.

"Ugh, what horrid things!" Zina, who was mortally afraid of all

beetles and caterpillars, shrank away. "And fancy you touching them with your hands!"

"Do you know what they are?" asked Fedya in a worried tone. "Tortoise-bugs. The very worst of all wheat pests."

"Stop it, Fedya," said Zina, disgusted. "You're always imagining queer things. Now garden fleas, now tortoise-shell bugs."

"Not tortoise-shell, tortoise-bugs, that's the name."

Fedya looked for a bug on the wheat, then took a magnifying glass out of his pocket.

"Look what it's doing, the parasite."

Sanka was the first to seize the magnifying glass and bring it close to the wheat ear.

"What can you see? Tell us!" the others pestered him.

"It's crawling . . . now it's looking round. . . . Heh, go easy there, don't all lean on me. It's stopped now. Ho-ho! It's sticking its trunk out, a tiny little thing . . . now it's bored it into the grain, now it's sucking. There's a pest for you! It'll suck all the sap out!"

Sanka stretched out his hand to take the bug off the wheat, but Masha checked him:

"Let us see too!"

The magnifying glass passed from hand to hand.

Grandad Vekshin came along. Seeing the tortoise-bug in the tin, he frowned.

"Ha-ha," he said, "our old enemy. Where did you find it?"

"In the vegetables, Grandad, and in the corn too; on that side of the vegetable garden," said Fedya pointing.

"So they've come out of the woods. Just wait, there'll be a regular wave of them."

"Can they attack the fields?" asked Sanka.

"I should think so. You should have seen what the pests did in 'thirty five, they left nothing of the harvest but the roots."

"Grandad," said Masha, "we should tell Tatyana Rodionovna. . . ."

"That we should!" Grandad looked round at the children: "Styopa!"

Styopa jumped up and stood to attention before Grandad like a soldier.

Grandad gave him his orders: "Take two of the children with you. Inspect and clean up the whole plot. You'll have to answer for each little blade, Fedya!"

"Yes, Grandad!"

"Take all the others and go to the fields, on a reconnaissance. Keep your eyes open, see if there are many tortoise-bugs in the wheat. Start with the stand nearest the wood. You'll find me in the office."

Fedya and the children went to the field. Sanka hung back a little and took Styopa aside.

"You know . . . have a good look, here on the plot. Please . . ." and then he rushed after Fedya.

Towards midday the "scouts" came running to the farm office, which was already full of people. Alarmed by Grandad Vekshin's report, Tatyana Rodionovna had urgently assembled all the brigade leaders.

"Tatyana Rodionovna . . . look!" Gasping, Fedya held out to the chairwoman a tin full of beetles.

"Where did you gather them?"

"We went over the whole field. But we found the most beetles on Auntie Katerina's plot."

"And things were going so well!" Tatyana Rodionovna looked in the tin and, with a gesture of annoyance, placed it on the window-sill. Then she turned with decision to those assembled: "Well, citizens, the reports are correct. The tortoise-bugs are coming from the wood. No time must be lost. Get the people out in the fields, we shall gather the pests with our hands." She looked at Lena Odintsova. "Katerina is ill in bed, isn't she? That is unfortunate. Well, Lena, take the brigade upon yourself for the time being. Will you manage?"

"I really don't know how, Tatyana Rodionovna. There are so few of us . . ." Lena did not finish. She looked round. Masha was pulling at her sleeve and pointing to herself, Fedya and Sanka. "Of course, if the children come. . . ."

"There can be no doubt about that," said Grandad Vekshin sternly. "This is something that has got to be done, so all will come."

"We'll kill every single beetle!" Masha declared.

"Gather as many children as you can, from the whole village," was Tatyana Rodionovna's advice.

The children went out.

Under the office window a flock of hens was greedily pecking the ground, as though it had been strewn with choice wheat grains. Fedya looked closer and noticed that it was not corn, but the beetles that they were pecking at. Nearby lay the empty tin—somebody had evidently knocked it down from the window-sill.

Fedya called the children and showed them the hens.

"There's something we can let loose on the tortoise-beetles too!"

"Oh, that's right!" cried Masha. "I read about that somewhere."

* * *

Next morning, the "mighty host," as Grandad Vekshin called the assembled Stozhari children, came to Staraya Pustosh and started to pick the beetles out of the corn.

A little later, Masha, Fedya and Sanka came to the field. They were carrying baskets with the tops covered with matting.

"Well, how did you manage?" asked Fedya, anxiously. "Did you fulfil your plan?"

"How could I?" Masha complained. "I caught seven hens, but two ran away into the nettles. I chased and chased them and got my legs all stung."

"And I took ours straight from the perch, just like that. They didn't even squawk," Sanka reported. "The silly old cock was the only one that made a row."

"Let's start then," said Fedya.

The children untied the baskets and let the hens free in the corn. The hens preened their ruffled wings and started clucking angrily.

Lena came into the field.

"We've mobilized the hens!" Masha cried, running up to her.

Lena looked in the direction of the collective farm and frowned.

"But do your mother and grandmother know? Did they say you could?"

"Not yet," was Masha's evasive reply.

Meanwhile, the hens went on clucking as though complaining to one another about such an unusual morning trip and wondering why there was only a large green field all around and no dung hills or fences.

"They won't find any beetles," Sanka said with a sigh.

"They will, they must," said Fedya, without taking his eyes off them.

"Oh, you dear stupid little things, go on, don't be afraid," Masha coaxed them in a whisper, cautiously edging them nearer the corn.

"Masha, look round!" whispered Fedya.

Coming along the foot-path with short quick steps, a switch in her hand, was Masha's grandmother, Manefa.

"Hey, you scamps!" she shouted. "What are you up to!"

"Grandma," said Masha, running to meet her, "we'll show you by experience. You know how hens like tortoise-bugs—more than corn."

"I won't hear of such a thing! Take our hens home!" stormed Manefa.

But just then the bronze-coloured cock that Sanka had brought pecked at a tortoise-bug, then a second. Then, tossing its head back, it clarified the news that there was something to fatten on in the new place after all.

"They're off, they're off!" Fedya leapt in the air and for some reason made a crowing sound, but so loud and unlike a cock that he almost frightened all the hens away.

Manefa started calling her hens, but, absorbed in the hunt for beetles, the hens paid not the slightest attention to her.

"The deuce take them!" said Manefa with a wave of the hand. "Let them gobble."

"Grandma, don't you fret, go home," Masha coaxed her. "We'll bring them back safe and sound this evening."

"And the hawk in the sky? And the fox behind the bush?" Manefa objected. "No, I'll guard them myself."

She stood for a time by the hens, peering all round her, but she soon tired of doing so, went to the children and, still complaining, began to collect beetles.

Hearing that tortoise-bugs had got in the wheat, Katerina could not restrain herself; she rose from bed and wended her way slowly to the field.

She was even alarmed at first; there were so many children in the field, she thought they would only trample the corn. But looking more attentively, she felt assured that all was going as it should.

The children were advancing in a line and gathering the beetles, some in empty tins, some in birch-bark baskets, some in bottles.

Now and then voices were heard:

"Over to the right, surround them!"

"Don't let 'em off!"

The little children were fetching water and shouting all over the field: "Who wants water? Who wants spring water?"

Katerina's heart fluttered.

"How much trouble you are taking, my dears," she whispered. She was about to set to work when she suddenly noticed the hens in the middle of the corn, greedily pecking at the beetles.

Lena and Sanka came running to her.

"Was it your idea about the hens?" Katerina asked Lena.

"No. The boys thought of it. Not a bad help either, is it? We are going to get some more after dinner."

"What could be better!" Katerina smiled.

"But why did you get up? What were the doctor's orders?" asked Sanka with a severe look.

"Everybody's in the fields, how could I lie in bed? When winter comes I'll get over all my ailments."

"You mustn't, Auntie Katya. Go home," said Lena. "We shall manage without you."

"What's this, trying to talk me over like a child!" Katerina said testily.

"I'm brigade leader now. I can even order you," Lena threatened jokingly. "Sanka, take her home."

"You'll see, I'll padlock the gate," Sanka promised.

"Using force, you cheeky things," Katerina laughed, and leaning trustfully on the boy's shoulder, she directed her steps towards home.

HAIL

It was an exceptionally close day, without a breath of wind, and the children just did not know what to do with themselves. Their only salvation was the river, and it was there that they all gathered. Some were diving, some swimming across the river, some jumping from the bluff.

Sanka gave the boys a display of his favourite turn: "deep-sea diving." He took a reed in his mouth and a heavy stone in his hands, and walked across the sandy bottom of the river with his head under water. Then he got out and lay by Fedya on the scorching sand.

"We're going to have a thunder-storm," Fedya said, as he watched the clouds massing on the horizon, now like high towers, now like enormous haystacks.

"How do you know? You can't go by clouds," Sanka observed.

"But I'm not going only by the clouds. . . . There are other signs too. Look there: the clover is folding its leaves, the swallows are skimming the water. And the flowers have such a strong smell . . . they always smell like that before rain."

The burning sand scorched their bodies, and the boys went into the water again.

Devyatkin, his whole body smeared with soft black mud, was sitting at the river's edge engaged in pelting all those who came out of the water with clots of mud. Sanka noticed that Fedya got more than anybody else. Twice he tried to get out of the water, but each time Devyatkin pasted his back and front with mud as black as tar, and Fedya had to retire into the water again to wash it off.

"Stick it, old man!" Devyatkin chortled good-naturedly. "The mud in Stozhari is as good for you as at a health resort. Take a mud-bath."

"You can have your fun, but don't overdo it," said Sanka going up to him. "Why do you stick to him like a burdock-flower?"

"You're not his nurse by any chance, are you?" Devyatkin retorted, spitting scornfully through his teeth. "Got your little friend on a lead like a calf!"

Fedya felt about among the snags, then, swimming up to Devyatkin, held out to him a wet spongy green clot:

"Do you know what this is? It's good for you too."

"I don't think! Just some kind of water moss...."

"Seriously. If you rub yourself with it, it livens your blood. Just try it."

Devyatkin backed away mistrustfully.

"A lot of use I have for that."

"Ha-ha, afraid of moss!" laughed Sanka.

Just the week before, Fedya had acquainted Sanka with that river plant—the fresh-water sponge. Sanka took the sponge out of Fedya's hand and rubbed his chest with it—but not too hard. His chest soon turned pink.

"Fine," said Sanka appreciatively. "Now for a race with anybody!" He threw the sponge to Devyatkin. "Well, still scared?"

With that incitement Devyatkin picked up the sponge, sniffed at it for some reason or other, and then cautiously ran it over his chest.

"Harder! As if you were scrubbing yourself in the bath." Sanka, grudging no effort, started rubbing Devyatkin's chest, shoulders and back, holding the sponge in both hands.

"It doesn't do anything. You're just making things up again," Petka panted, offering first one side and then the other.

A few minutes elapsed, and Petka's body turned a deep red. He suddenly sprang up and started twisting about as though stung by nettles. Then he rushed at Sanka and Fedya.

"What's this ... are you two against me?"

Sanka and Fedya burst out laughing and jumped into the water.

"You ass! It's a fresh-water sponge. It's used for colds!" Sanka shouted from the water. "It works better than spirits."

Shouting with rage, Petka rolled himself on the bank, jumped up, flung mud at Sanka and Fedya and again dropped in the sand.

"Get in the water," Fedya advised him from the other bank. "It'll get better."

Devyatkin splashed into the water and the burning soon passed off. But still he sat in the water, swearing for all he was worth at Fedya and Sanka whom he accused of getting together against him.

Towards midday a huge ungainly storm-cloud, tinged with violet, loomed up over Stozhari.

A sharp gust of wind bent the grass to the ground, covered the river with serried ripples, and bristled the hay on the top of the stack.

There was a white flash of lightning, a peal of thunder rolled from on high with a sharp crack, like a huge piece of calico torn asunder, and heavy slanting streams of rain bored like arrows into the river. The river started seething and splashing as though miniature fountains were playing on it.

"Sound the alarm!" shouted Fedya, and he made a dash for the plot.

The boys ran after him. The rain, heavy and sheet-like, blinded them and took their breath away.

From the outskirts dashed a group of girls, Masha and Zina in the lead. Masha slipped on the hillock and shot down the slippery, muddy path as if it were coated with ice.

They all burst into the plot. The corn was quivering, and bowing to the ground.

"Our 'Konshakovka' will be laid flat!" screamed Masha, running about the plot. She shook her little fist at the menacing storm-cloud: "You wait, you black, shaggy thing!"

"I wish we could blast it with a gun or a 'Katyusha', like we do the nazis," said Sanka gloweringly. "That would soon finish it off."

But how the corn was to be saved at that moment, no one knew.

Suddenly Fedya remembered how seedlings on hotbeds were protected against showers.

"Take the hut to pieces!" he shouted. "Cover up the corn!"

In a minute not a trace was left of the hut. The boys, raising sheets of iron, strips of plywood and wooden doors above their heads, formed a roof over the bed with the "Konshakovka" in it. But even so there were not enough shields. Sanka looked anxiously around.

Beyond the fence on the hillock, flatted on the grass by the downpour, lay long strips of matting. Under a bush sat old

Manefa, who had evidently not had time to take them in before the rain.

Sanka slipped quickly through the fence.

At that moment, a flash of lightning like a fiery cross rent the sky and there was such a roar overhead that old Manefa, terrified, covered her head with her kerchief. And when she peeped out, she saw the matting crawling like a live thing behind some barefooted youngster. With a scream she set off in pursuit. But the fence rose up before her. By the time the old woman had found the entrance and run across the plot, the boys had managed to stretch the strips over the bed of wheat.

Manefa seized a twig and started to belabour the boys' backs.

"Grandma, we only need them for a minute," cried Masha, seizing her from behind. "It won't hurt your mats!"

The shower was followed by hail. Leaves ripped from the trees were scattered on the ground. The mats looked as if they had been sprinkled with salt.

Old Manefa clasped her head in her hands and crept with a groan under the outstretched matting.

The hail drummed with a hollow sound on the plywood and iron sheets and weighed down the matting, lashing the children's hands and heads and rolling into their shirt collars.

Now and then exclamations were heard:

"Oh, that one hit me on the ear!"

"We're being shelled!"

"Hi, Grandma Manefa! Still alive?"

"Stand to the last man, Guards!"

"I've got three lumps on my forehead."

"When will it stop, drat it!"

"Girls," ordered Fedya, "go away! All go and take cover!"

"Take cover yourselves!" answered Masha, and then she gave a shout, for a large hailstone had struck her painfully on the back of the head.

Styopa suddenly darted across the plot, snatched the straw hats from the scarecrows and put them on the girls' heads.

Andrei Ivanich, enveloped in a soldier's cape-tent, and Grandad Vekshin in a cap and short sheepskin coat appeared on the plot.

"What splendid fellows!" cried Grandad. "Battling with the hail."

The teacher smiled at the sight of such an unusual duel and helped the children to hold up the matting.

Soon the hail veered aside, rattled for a while in the coppice and then subsided altogether.

Everybody looked around. Here and there crops were beaten to the ground; the "Konshakovka" alone stood erect and undamaged.

Deeply moved, Grandad gazed at the children. "I shall give you . . . I don't know what I shall give you for that . . . I shall regale you with honey."

"The dare-devils!" sighed old Manefa. "Taking my mats!"

"We had a good reason, Grandma!" said Masha.

"Well, am I complaining? I say you are dare-devils. Look at the lumps on your heads, like ripe plums. Put plantain on them, plantain. A copper five-kopeck piece is good for them too."

"Now then, you battered warriors, away you go home!" said the schoolmaster. "Get dry, change your clothes. The battle is over."

"But we have no wounded, Andrei Ivanich," said Fedya.

"Never mind. Off you go."

Sanka looked anxiously over the fence at the fields.

"Andrei Ivanich, what's it like in the field? Do you know?"

"Zakhar Mitrich and I are just going to have a look"

"Then I'll go with you."

Nearly all the children wanted to go to the field.

They crossed the swollen turbid stream in the ravine, and on their way up to Staraya Pustosh they met Katerina. She was walking at the head of a group of collective-farm women, barefooted, without any kerchief, her hair wet and matted.

"It passed us by, Andrei Ivanich!" she said, seeing the teacher.

"The hail did us no harm. It veered off to the side. And the rain was all to the good. What about your place, children?"

"It's all right in our place too, Auntie Katya!" cried Masha.

GRAIN

The corn began to shimmer like bronze.

In the evenings the landrails answered each other's calls across the meadows; there was a strong smell of rye in the damp evening air; the moon like a copper bowl hung so low in the sky that you wanted to jump and throw pebbles into it.

The children had the feeling that not all danger had passed and that something must yet befall the corn. There would be hail, glut-tonous birds would settle on the field, the susliks or the field-mice would get scent of the rich harvest, the plot would be invaded by sucking pigs or cows.

Day in day out the children stood guard over the plot.

But the weather remained fine and cloudless. To frighten away the birds, Styopa So-by-So put up a few more scarecrows with rattles and windmills. Alyosha Syomushkin laid his "death-to-suslik" snares everywhere. The susliks showed no particular desire to be killed, but Masha, going around day-dreaming one day, got her foot caught in one of the snares, and afterwards hobbled about with a stick for several days. To Syomushkin's immense satisfaction, she had to admit that snares of his make were dangerous things.

The ripening of the "Konshakovka" brought fresh anxieties. Several times a day Masha tested the grains with her teeth and ran to Grandad Vekshin.

"Grandad, the wheat will be standing too long, it will shed its grain!"

"It's all right, it's all right," the old man reassured her, "let it still drink in the good sun."

At last, the "Konshakovka" was ripe. The heavy bearded ears bowed to the earth and rustled dry and warm like silver paper.

"Our corn is full and ripe," said Zakhar. "Tomorrow we shall start at the crack of dawn."

But here, too, there was no avoiding argument.

Sanka said that he and Fedya would mow the whole bed in no time, not leaving a single ear.

Masha raised a determined protest. This was not just grass, it was special wheat; the way they swung their scythes, they would knock all the grain out.

"No, Zina and I will reap it with sickles. And you can bind it into sheaves."

"Us bind it!" Sanka burst out indignantly.

"Quite right," Grandad Vekshin agreed. "You must realize what each grain is worth. Fine sensitive hands are needed for that job."

Galling though it was for the boys, they had to resign themselves.

That very evening the girls plaited the binders, and Grandad Vekshin sharpened the sickles.

Unable to contain her impatience, Masha ran to about a dozen of the farm cottages:

"We're reaping the 'Konshakovka' tomorrow. Come and watch!"

Early on the Sunday morning, when the wheat was still moist and soft, the collective-farm women assembled at the plot.

Katerina and all her team came, and with them Tatyana Rodionovna, Andrei Ivanich, and old Manefa.

"Please don't trample anything. Keep to the paths," Syomushkin implored, running round the women.

Masha and Zina Kolesova came to the bed and stood at opposite corners. As was the custom, they had shouldered their sickles. Grandad Vekshin nodded to them. The girls took their sickles from their shoulders and bent down both together. With the left hand they gathered a handful of wheat, swung the toothed sickle underneath, with a soft crunching cut the cool yellowish stems, and placed them on the plaited binder. Eight to ten handfuls—and a sheaf was ready.

"Bind, Fedya!" Masha said with a nod.

Sanka was binding for Zina. He did not do it very skilfully, but his knots were tight.

"They're making fast work of that job," the women whispered, watching the girls.

"No wasting time for them."

"Look at the sweep she's got!"

"You can see at once that they are collective-farm people."

"They'll make fine reapers!"

Encouraged by the remarks of the grown-ups, Masha and Zina put all their hearts into their work.

But after a while Zina started straightening up now and again and rubbing the small of her back.

"So your back's aching," hissed Sanka behind her. "Want a rest in the shade? Call yourself a reaper!"

All of a sudden Katerina stepped forward on to the bristling stubble. She rolled down the sleeves of her blouse and took Masha's sickle from her.

"Let me see what your wheat is like."

Neatly gathering the stalks together, she cut a handful of wheat—such a handful that Sanka gasped with wonder—held it high at arm's length, nursed it like a tiny babe and looked round at the women:

"There's fine wheat for you! It is dragging my hand down with the weight. Pity the plot is rather small."

Katerina reaped two sheaves and then passed the sickle on to Tatyana Rodionovna.

"We grew it, we'll reap it," cried Masha, upset.

"Don't you be so greedy," Katerina answered, laughing. "We all want to try."

Soon all the wheat was gathered from number five bed. The sheaves dried in the sun until midday. Then they were taken to the barn, where they were threshed, winnowed and put into a sack to be carried to the collective-farm office.

Everybody was serious and solemn, except the youngsters, who ran ahead, shouting at the tops of their voices: "They're bringing the Konshakovka! The Konshakovka!"

In the office, the members of the board were holding a discussion. The children carried the sack into the room.

"Bring it here, bring it here to the place of honour!" Tatyana Rodionovna rose from the table, took the sack and placed it on a bench in the corner where the plan of the collective farm hung beside a diploma that the farm had won at the Agricultural Exhibition.

"Which of you is going to carry our present?" Andrei Ivanich whispered to the children.

"Sanka Konshakov," Masha replied in the same tone. "It's his own father's wheat."

"No," Sanka shook his head. "Fedya saved it: let him carry it."

"It wasn't me at all, it was Grandad." Fedya protested awkwardly.

"What's all the reckoning for?" Grandad Vekshin interrupted. "The 'Konshakovka' will speak for itself. And if any reckoning is needed, Masha has it all written down."

Masha squeezed through to the front, opened her little diary and began to read out hurriedly how many grains had been sown on number five bed, how many had germinated, how many stems had been destroyed by natural calamities—that heading included the hail, the beetles, Dolinka who had got into the plot unnoticed, Sanka and Petka—and, finally, how many grains had been preserved and yielded a harvest.

Everybody started to laugh.

"There's book-keeping for you! She's found the balance! We need one like her on our board."

One by one the brigade and team leaders and the farm workers went up to the sack, carefully took out a pinch of the corn and placed it on the palm of their hands.

"Golden wheat!" they said, full of respect.

"Rich corn!"

"Wonderful stuff!"

Just as carefully, they put the grains back in the sack.

Only old Manefa, blowing on the corn, put it in her mouth.

"What are you doing, Grandma!" Masha rushed to her. "That's a whole two acres you've destroyed." And hearing someone laugh, she went on: "Yes, a whole two acres! Remember what Yegor Platonovich started with? Three ears."

But old Manefa did not hear a word. Closing her eyes, she chewed the grains of wheat for a long time, then clicked her tongue loudly, smacked her lips and crossed herself with fervour.

"Glory to Thee. . . . We've lived to see real white flour for our pies!"

"Well, children..." Tatyana Rodionovna cast a glance over the children standing by the door. "Thank you very much indeed, in the name of our collective farm. You and Zakhar Mitrich. You have grown excellent wheat. We shall make it one of our basic varieties. Klasha," she said, nodding to the accountant, "put our young collective farmers down for the extra pay that is due to them."

"Will the corn be given a number, or what shall we call it?" asked Klasha.

"It already has a name, a better one could not be imagined," said the schoolmaster, "in honour of Yegor Platonovich Konshakov."

CHAPTER 38

BRIGADE LEADER

Sleep is sound at dawn. Katerina approached Sanka's bed and touched him on the shoulder. But sleep still held the boy fast. He mumbled, pulled the blanket over his face and kicked out violently. Katerina almost decided not to waken him so early, but then she remembered what day it was and bent down over him again.

"Get up. You told me yourself you wanted to be woken up... We are going out to Staraya Pustosh."

Sanka opened his eyes, looked about him, and was on his feet immediately. He too remembered everything. The ploughing up of abandoned land had started all over the district. Pushkin Collective Farm had decided to set to work on Staraya Pustosh. That was why both young and old were on their way there that day.

To start with, the collective-farm women levelled the mounds, filled the pits and ruts with earth and rooted out the bushes. The boys gathered the fallen branches and twigs together in big heaps and made bonfires. Long tongues of flame curled high in the sky, snarling like angry dogs.

Sanka and Fedya took their job with the fires so seriously that their face grew as red as stokers'; their hair smelt of smoke, their singed eyebrows and eye-lashes were curling, and their shirts were dotted with tiny holes from the sparks that shot out of the blaze.

After Staraya Pustosh had been cleared, the ploughmen came there.

Sanka was still attracted by the horses.

One day he had met a cart with Muromets in the shafts at the entrance to the village. It was driven by Anka Speshneva, who was taking the milk to town instead of Yevdokia Devyatkina. The ungreased wheels were squeaking mournfully, the tin milk-cans were making a deafening rattle, but the driver, dozing in the heat, did not notice anything.

Sanka stopped Muromets, put his hand to the harness and shook Anka out of her doze.

"Look! The saddle-cushion is all on one side, the shaft-bow has slipped. You can hear the wheels squeaking a hundred miles away. Is that the way Stozhari people drive? I'd rather the earth swallowed me up!"

"Who do you think you're teaching?" snorted Anka.

"Teaching you or not, he's quite right," said Tatyana Rodionovna, coming up to them. "Don't you spoil our collective farm's reputation, Anka. You know how people judge: as the harness, so the master. We'll, Konshakov, show her how to manage with a horse."

Sanka quickly re-harnessed the horse, put the saddle-cushion right, straightened the shaft-bow and pulled the saddle-strap tight.

"A real picture!" said Tatyana Rodionovna praisingly. "Look here, Sanka, come to the office this evening. You and I must have a talk."

Time dragged slowly on that day. Sanka even had the impression that the sun had decided not to set at all, but to shine on till next morning.

At last it got dark. Refusing his supper, Sanka flew to the office. He stopped in the porch a moment to catch breath after his run, then he entered the office with a leisurely, measured step.

Tatyana Rodionovna was not alone: with her were members of the board, Andrei Ivanich and Lena.

"Here is young Konshakov, just the boy we were talking about..." said the chairwoman, beckoning Sanka nearer the table. "So you can manage horses, can you?"

"Yes, I can."

"And the boys do what you say?"

"Of course they do."

"Well, Sanka, it's like this. The harvest is approaching, and so is the threshing. The sheaves have to be brought in from the fields, and the wheat to be delivered to the state. But we haven't got enough hands. So the board has decided to form a transport brigade of boys. Only we don't know whom to put in charge of them. What do you think, Sanka?"

Sanka felt a pang of disappointment. So they had not complete confidence in him yet. He crumpled his forage cap in his hands, breathed on the little red star, and by force of habit started rubbing it with his tunic sleeve.

"Careful with your little star, Sanka," Tatyana Rodionovna said, smiling. "It's already shining as bright as the moon. Whom do you think we should appoint brigade leader?"

"Fedya Cherkashin would do . . . or Styopa Karasyov," said Sanka with an effort. "They could manage."

"And I suggest Konshakov," Lena said, exchanging glances with Andrei Ivanich.

"How am I to understand that?" asked Tatyana Rodionovna. "Does it mean that the Young Communist League recommends him?"

Lena turned towards Sanka. Their eyes met. Sanka's look was serious and unwavering. "You've seen me, you ought to know," it said.

"Yes we do, Tatyana Rodionovna. I am sure of him," said Lena.

"Tatyana Rodionovna!" Sanka leaned forward. "Yes I, yes we . . . yes I'll make such a brigade. We'll cart a thousand poods if necessary. Anything you like!"

"But mind," the schoolmaster warned him. "Don't forget about school. You must get into the seventh class."

"I'm preparing, Andrei Ivanich. Fedya and I study together," said Sanka.

"Well then," the chairwoman said in agreement, "roll your sleeves up, young brigade leader, and get to work."

Next day Sanka went to the stables.

"I've missed you, Sanka," Sedelnikova said to him. "They've given me old Manefa as assistant and she's afraid to go near the horses. She's always coaxing them and crossing herself. So you be strict here, like a man."

"Of course, I shall," Sanka replied.

He cleaned out the stables, filled the mangers with hay and pumped fresh water into the drinking-trough.

To get into Sanka Konshakov's transport brigade became the cherished dream of all the Stozhari boys.

But Sanka was very particular about whom he accepted in his brigade. He demanded of every driver that he should be able to catch the restive Liska, harness her to a cart and drive her through a narrow crooked alley without scraping the axles against anything, and all in a fixed number of minutes. He demanded, too, that every driver should know how to stand up for his comrades and not complain to the adults over trifles.

The harvest began. The bright kerchiefs of the women reapers and the white shirts of the mowers gleamed in the fields; the reaping machines waved their wings like huge birds of the steppes.

The thresher wailed and whistled shrilly in the barn. When a hot rustling sheaf was thrust into its sharp-toothed jaws, it growled and panted like a dog over a bone.

Out of the tail of the thresher came the light glossy straw, out of its side poured the warm sun-bronzed grain.

There was plenty of work for the young carters. They brought the sheaves from the field to the thresher and drove off the grain to the storage warehouse.

Sanka knew every rut on the road, every rise and dip, and he could have led his column with his eyes shut. He gained the reputation of a sensible and efficient brigade leader.

On the way from Stozhari to town, lay the village of Loktevo. When there was rain, the road near Loktevo became an impassable bog. The wheels of the carts sunk in axle-deep; the horses overstrained themselves. One day three carts got stuck in this bog. The drivers had to carry the sacks across to a dry spot on their backs, unharness the horses and drag out the carts themselves.

The boys got worn out and swore for all they were worth at Bashlikov, the chairman of the Loktevo Collective Farm.

"You can curse as much as you like, but it'll be the same thing tomorrow," said Sanka angrily, and he suddenly set off resolutely for the village. "Let's go to Bashlikov, Fedya. We'll show him. . . ."

Infuriated and smeared with mud, the boys sought out the chairman in the office. Realizing what was wanted of him, Bashlikov declared that he had other things besides the road to think of.

"Think of the stone we'd have to tip into the bog like that, and the sand? How can I get it there? Where am I to find the carts?"

"But we'll help you," Sanka said. "We'll cart the stuff."

"Oh, that's a different matter!" said Bashlikov, cheering up. "All right, you help us."

The carters kept their word. Coming back from town empty, they loaded their carts every time with stones and sand from the river, and branches from the woods, and dumped it all near the bad patch.

But Bashlikov was in no hurry to start repairing the road.

"You wait, we'll give you a lesson!" Sanka resolved, and one day the young carters turned off to the left, a little short of the village, and by the bad patch of road put up a post with the notice: "Bog. Detour to the left. Collective-Farm Chairman Bashlikov."

It was not until next morning that the chairman saw that expressive notice. He clasped his head in his hands. In the space of twenty-four hours, dozens of carts had beaten a broad black track over the farm lands.

Willy-nilly, Bashlikov had to send people in a hurry to the muddy stretch to fill it with branches, rubble and earth. The incident got round the whole district. Collective farmers who met the young Slozhari carters drew off the road to let the boys pass and raised their caps with exaggerated respect: "How d'ye do! What's Bashlikov feeling like after that bit of self-criticism?"

Sanka used to return home late in the evening, covered with dust and sunburnt. He would pull his top boots off his weary feet, drop them on the floor with a thud and take his place gravely at the supper table.



"Well, bread-winner," Katerina would say with a smile. "So we're sure of bread for the winter, aren't we?"

"Of course! Today they put down a fine quota for each of us," Sanka would answer.

"Have some more soup, brigade leader?"

"Very well."

Sanka often brought Fedya home with him. They would have supper together and then, surrounding themselves with books and exercise-books, they would study their lessons.

Katerina would put Fenya and Nikitka to bed so that they would not disturb the older ones, and she herself went about on tiptoe.

After their studies Fedya would be in a hurry to go to his Grandad, but Katerina would not let him. She would make him sleep with Sanka and in the morning give both the boys their breakfast and see them off to work.

One day towards dusk, Grandad Vekshin made his way to the Konshakovs' cottage. Katerina met him in the porch.

"It's too bad of you, Katya dear," he said reproachfully. "You're luring my grandson away from me."

"Just you look at our cocks, how peacefully they've settled down together." Katerina pointed through the window into the cottage, where Sanka and Fedya were studying at the table. "It looks as though mine has begun to have some sense, he's going back to school."

Grandad peeped into the cottage, then carefully pushed the leaves of the window to and sat down on the banked-up earth round the cottage. Katerina sat beside him, deep in thought.

"Zakhar Mitrich, I'm returning to an old subject. Let Fedya come and live with me. Don't be offended if I speak my mind. You're getting on in years, your health is none too good, you never can tell . . . anything might happen. And then the boy would be an orphan again. And he's only a poor little fledgling, he can't fly by himself yet. He needs a mother."

Grandad Vekshin bowed his head and did not answer for a long time.

"I don't wish my grandson any harm. . . . But you know, it hurts, Katya dear: all spring and summer there was noise around me, the children laughing and talking. It made me feel young again myself. But here comes autumn and again I'm all on my lonesome. . . ."

Katerina felt sorry for the old man.

"Well then, you come and live with us too," she said suddenly, vexed that she had not hit upon the idea sooner.

"What, in this doll's house of yours?" the old man exclaimed in astonishment.

"It may be small, but it's a home, Zakhar Mitrich. We'll all find room somehow."

"No," the old man said after a moment's thought. "But look here, if you like, you move in with me. With all your household. What is it you've got here? A little cabin with only two small windows. But, say what you like about it, mine is a pre-war house, and a roomy one."

"Why, you're right, Zakhar Mitrich!" said Katerina, overjoyed. "And we'll all live as one family. I must go and consult the children."

CHAPTER 39 STARS IN THE SKY

The swallows, who had got used to living under the eaves of the school building during the summer, were considerably alarmed; all the morning the little yard had been full of children arguing noisily about something and casting inquisitive glances at their nests. But the birds were soon reassured. The children went away somewhere, and it was once more quiet in the yard. Then two girls came and sat in the porch.

"What do you think," Masha asked Zina Kolesova, "will our boys pass?"

"They must. They studied, didn't they?" her friend answered judiciously.

"I should think they did! But just suppose something happens. . . . Let's ask the daisies."

The girls plucked the petals off about a dozen flowers: "Pass, fail, pass, fail."

It turned out that all would be well with Fedya and Timka but Sanka would not pass the test.

"Oh, that's just old women's nonsense," said Masha, crossly scattering the flowers. "They'll all pass."

Presently Syomushkin and Styopa came running into the yard.

"Well, what about our chaps?"

"No news so far," said Zina.

The children wandered along the empty school corridors and tried to get a peep into the class-room, but Andrei Ivanich raised a stern warning finger at them.

So they had to sit and wait.

At last the examinations were over. The pupils streamed out into the yard. Timka's beaming face told Masha at once that everything had gone off well. Timka said that nearly all the children who had prepared during the summer had been enrolled in the sixth class. Only two are kept down in the fifth.

Sanka and Fedya soon appeared.

"With us? In the seventh?" Masha asked, running up.

The friends nodded. Masha felt like shouting hurrah at the good news, but just then her eyes fell on the old birch-tree in the school garden, and she whispered to Sanka:

"Remember what you wrote? You must scratch it out...."

Sanka cast an embarrassed glance at the children: "All right.... Later."

But Masha picked up a piece of glass, ran to the birch-tree and started scraping off the trunk the word "Good-bye." The other children went up to the tree too.

However, the inscription had taken a firm hold on the bark during the summer and was not so easy to remove.

"Go away, I'll do it myself!"

Sanka pushed Masha aside, got out his clasp-knife and crossed out "Good-bye". Then, after a glance at the children, he carved fresh words.

"Hullo, school!" Fedya read out. "That goes for me too." And taking the knife from Sanka he scratched his name underneath.

"Let me sign as well!" cried Timka.

"Pity the poor birch-tree," said Andrei Ivanich coming into the yard. Then he looked at what the children had written and smiled.

After standing a while near the tree, the schoolmaster went with the children to Stozhari.

They climbed the hillock and could not help stopping. In the crystal air and the bright sunshine, the meadow, the cornfields and

the trees were so fresh and colourful that they looked as though adorned for a great feast-day.

The old spreading willows by the river rustled in the wind, dazzling the eyes with the silvery shimmer of their leaves. Bright billowing clouds, now like branches of apple blossom, now like white-breasted swans, floated in the vast vault of the sky.

The mowed meadow beyond the river was covered with such thick juicy aftermath that despite the efforts of cows and calves to strip it, the grass still maintained its emerald sheen.

From the fields came a smell of honey, of baked bread and of something else inexpressibly sweet and pleasant. Grasshoppers bounced up out of the grass, striking one in the face. The air rang with an incessant twittering and chirping.

"Oh, how fine!" Masha could not help exclaiming.

"What's fine?" Zina Kolesova asked perplexed.

"The fields and everything. Our meadow, our wood, our little river. And the clouds in the sky. I should like to walk on and on like this. . . . I don't think there's any place anywhere on earth better than our Stozhari."

"The clouds, the fields. . . . Fancy that!" Syomushkin chimed in. "You don't know yet what amazing places there are in the world. I'd like to live in the subtropics, for instance. Nobody's ever heard of our Stozhari!"

"What's wrong with Stozhari?" said Andrei Ivanich. "At the front sometimes, during a halt, I would close my eyes and Stozhari was there, true to life, before me; with the river splashing, the white footpath running over the fields and the smell of the wheat. And sometimes you raise your head at night and look at the sky, when there's not a single cloud in it, and all the stars, big and small, seem to be on parade, and you get lost in admiration. Such beauty above you, such immensity, you just cannot find words to express it all. And if you look more closely at the starry sky, you begin to understand what all that beauty is made up of: there you have the Great Bear, there the Little Bear, there the Bull, Hercules, the Dragon, the Goat. Each one has its allotted place, and shines at its fixed hour. And in that

immense world of the stars you find the modest little Stozhari cluster: 'Aha!' you think, 'there's no doing without you.' And you, my little friends, have not forgotten, have you, where that constellation is?"

"No, Andrei Ivanich, we often look at it," answered Masha.

"Well, so it is with our earthly Stozhari," the teacher went on. "It is lost in the immensity of our native land, but it shines on people together with all the other stars, big and small."

"Andrei Ivanich!" Masha, nibbling a blade of grass, looked at the sky, although there were no stars yet to be seen there. "Do you know what I want? I want our Stozhari to shine brightest of all, like the Great Bear up there, or the Pole Star. So that everybody can see us ever so far away. Those who sail the seas, those who are fighting the war, and those who are in Moscow. When people look at the starry sky they will say: 'What is that up there shining so bright and never going out? What is that new star?' And the astronomers who watch the stars will answer: 'It's not a new star; it's a very old constellation, the Stozhari. But we don't yet understand ourselves why it has started shining so brightly.'"

"And the whole cause of it," the teacher smiled, "turns out to be that there are such remarkable children living at Stozhari."

Masha flushed crimson. "But what do you think, Andrei Ivanich? We have only to grow a tiny bit. Think of the things we shall do for our collective farm then! I shall go away and study. To be an agronomist or a plant-breeder. And then I shall come back to my Stozhari. I shall grow triple-eared wheat, wheat that you only need to sow once and it comes up every year for fifteen years. And it'll be wheat that's not afraid of anything, neither cold nor heat, nor hail. And I'll call it 'Stozhari Immortal.' They'll write about it later in all scientific books. Or no—I'd rather work in the orchard and grow grapes. Or apples. Big ones, so big that you just can't eat more than one..."

"Isn't she greedy, she's grabbed everything," said Sanka with a smile. "And what will be left for us?"

"For you?" Masha said thoughtfully. "There'll be work for everybody. You, for instance, can regulate the weather. You sit in a control cabin just below the clouds and take orders by wireless. 'Hullo!

Weather-duty man speaking. Who's that?' 'Pushkin Collective Farm.' 'What's your order?' 'Rain for forty-five minutes.' 'What kind?' 'Fine rain, the kind that's good for mushrooms.' 'All right. Order accepted. Please get ready!' And there you are, you turn on the rain for forty-five minutes."

"Regulate the weather, that's some idea!" Syomushkin said in a fit of mirth. "Well and what will my work be?"

And probably the good-natured Masha would have picked out some fitting pursuit, had it not been for Zina Kolesova, who said that it was all fantastic like in Jules Verne.

"You think everything's fantastic that doesn't grow in a vegetable bed!" said Masha tartly. "But you wait till the war is over. All our land will be beautiful and useful. Won't it, Andrei Ivanich?"

"Yes, I think it will," answered the schoolmaster. "When a man has great dreams he can achieve anything. Especially in a land like ours."

Arriving at Stozhari, the children bade Andrei Ivanich good-bye, but for some reason Sanka was not in any hurry to go home.

Lena came up and spoke to the schoolmaster, inviting him to a meeting at which the Y.C.L. was to enrol new members that evening.

Sanka's heart started thumping.

"Can I join now?" he asked in a low voice.

Lena looked at Andrei Ivanich.

"I should probably vote in favour," said the schoolmaster with a sidelong glance at the boy. "Sanka has made good."

"And I shall vote for him too," said Lena. "Bring your application quickly."

"But I have it here already!" Sanka put his hand in the pocket of his tunic and brought out a crumpled piece of paper worn away at the folds.

"No, that won't do," he said. "I'd better write a fresh one."

"Yes, write a fresh one," said Andrei Ivanich.

CHAPTER 40
A BIG FAMILY

On the Sunday, the Konshakovs moved into Vekshin's cottage. They drove over their few belongings on two carts, leading the cow behind.

Before they left, Sanka and his mother went to have a look at the poplar in the garden. It would have been grand if they could have dug it out and taken it to the new place too, but its roots had struck deep in the earth, and it was a pity to disturb it.

"It doesn't matter, we'll take a graft from it in spring," Katerina said soothingly to her son; "we'll plant it under the window."

At noon, when the new large Konshakov family sat down to their meal, Andrei Ivanich came in.

"Congratulations, Katerina Vasilievna!"

"On the house-warming again? Why, Andrei Ivanich, you congratulated me only the day before yesterday!"

"No, on something else. Our collective-farm family needs a good housekeeper. They are nominating you, Katerina Vasilievna, chairwoman of the management board."

"Me?" Katerina exclaimed, rising from the table and glancing at the children. "Don't make me blush, Andrei Ivanich, at least not in front of the children."

"Why should I? I'm speaking seriously: Have you heard about Tatyana Rodionovna? They are taking her away from us for work at the district. I was at the District Party Committee today. They were wondering whom they would recommend at Stozhari instead of Tatyana Rodionovna. They thought of you. And when they asked me about it, I said: 'A better housekeeper you cannot find.'"

"You said that?" Katerina shot an imploring glance at the teacher. "Where shall I get the strength from?"

"You've got plenty of that," the teacher replied, smiling.

Katerina pondered. "Give me time to think."

That day she did not go out at all; she went about her house-work, endeavouring to collect her thoughts in solitude.

In the evening, the collective-farm women assembled in Grandad Vekshin's house. They asked Katerina about her new home, looked over the neat spacious cottage, and then seated themselves on the bench.

"We want you to be our housekeeper, Katerina dear. Instead of Tatyana Rodionovna," said Vasilisa Sede'nikova. "The people need you very much now. Will you give your consent?"

"Don't you dare think of refusing," Pelageya Kolechkina seconded Sede'nikova. "There will be a vote anyhow. Now you've got us into this, and made us interested, you must lead us on to the end."

Katerina raised her head. Her friends were looking at her with sympathetic expectant eyes. And behind them she noticed Sanka. The boy seemed to nod his head and whisper urgently: "Take it on! Take it on! It's your job." Katerina remembered the difficult war years she had lived through with these women, and felt more than ever how much she cherished her collective-farm family.

She drew a deep breath and put her arms round the shoulders of the women sitting next to her: "Re'ly on me, my friends. . . ."

The collective-farm women left. After seeing them to the corner Katerina returned to the cottage. Sanka was standing with his back to her, engrossed in his father's photographs on the wall.

Katerina went up noiselessly behind him and drew him to her. Sanka quivered, but did not move away.

"We will manage it, Sanka. I'm not alone. . . . And Fedya is with us. . . . You have grown just like your father." Her eyes dim, Katerina looked into the boy's face and stroked his unruly hair. "It was you that gave me the extra strength, my son."

"Yes, we will manage it," Sanka answered confidently, and a word that never left his lips without difficulty came out this time easily and without constraint: "Of course, we will make it, Mother."

Then he went out into the street. By the porch stood Fedya.

A ragged storm cloud that had been lurking near Stozhari since noon, had drifted aside and was creeping with an angry rumbling away over the horizon. A puff of wind passed calmly over the earth, stroking the bristled grass, and whispering something to the trees, as though asking them whether they were ready to meet the morrow's dawn. The sky broke out in stars.

The boys threw back their heads and looked up. Across the heavens the Milky Way flowed like a boundless river.

In the midst of the fiery chariots, the lightning steeds, the silvery flowers and branches, in the midst of that immense harvest of stars, Sanka found the tiny constellation and smiled to the seven small stars as to good old friends.

"Fedya, have you found the Stozhari?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it true that if you look at them for a long time they seem to get bigger and bigger?"

"And they shine brighter."

Katerina came up to the boys: "What have you found there in the sky?"

"Look, Mum, how the stars have come out," said Sanka.

Raising her head, Katerina gazed at the starry sky: "It looks as if it were strewn with wheat . . . tomorrow will be a lovely day."



Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

